Peninsula

and other stories

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Second Edition

Cover photo by Cathy K.

Excerpts from *Beowulf* are taken from John R. Clark Hall's translation (Cambridge, 1914)

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His soul is gone, whither? Who saw it come in, or who saw it go out? Nobody; yet everybody is sure he had one, and hath none.

— *John Donne*

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Make It So

It was a simple enough proposition: draw a curve whose end-points of birth and death stood for the only two certainties in this crazy life, with whatever else got thrown in between serving merely as random variables in probability space. Real world, it resembled a quivering tightrope strung between two platforms, those offering the only true vantage points from which to view the insanity of what lay ahead or behind.

Foley now turned and looked behind him and wondered if there had even been a tightrope, if he'd actually been walking on air the whole time. It appeared obvious he'd been talking to the air, with not one student having shown up for his mathematics lecture.

The young bearded man in tie and glasses scanned the room, twirling a piece of chalk like a baton, but with no one to cue. He had the rapt attention of every empty seat – every seat but the one down front, to the far left and occupied by the squat figure of the department head, Dr. Singh.

The woman in the teal-green pants suit with matching nails was certainly more intent on whatever her phone's screen had to say than on what he'd been scribbling away at on the blackboard. Eventually, she would get around to telling Foley that he was being relieved of his duties as a faculty member, effective immediately. No one had signed up for his course on linear algebra. And this being the first day of the fall semester, his instant termination meant the comptroller would have no more outlays to process for the remainder of his teaching schedule – being as there were no other classes assigned to him.

Thus, for Foley, life at the university was over. He'd be allowed to return to his desk to collect his lunch box, but the books and notes spread out there were property of the administration now. With empty box in hand, he waved to whomever was still in the faculty office and walked out. The sad thing was, no one even noticed him waving.

Following a quick glance through its doorway, Foley passed up the remedial math lab room.

Werner's head leaned out the door. "Hey, man. Lunchin' kinda

early, aren't ya?"

Foley stopped, turned and smiled. "Seems I have no choice today but to."

"Sorry, man," said Werner. "I was just, you know, trying to make a joke. Lighten things up. Hope you're not still riled then."

"Somewhat," Foley responded. "But it happens. You know, life and everything in between. Let's me catch up on a few things anyway."

"Hey, go grab yourself a favorite snack and chow down. What I would do. No sense in getting drunk though. Just makes it feel worse."

"Thanks. I think I'll go grocery shopping and pick out something really fattening and expensive."

"There ya go! Take it easy, man."

The path to his car fronted the student union. He heard her again, the girl singing with the guitar. It was nearing the end of the lunch break for most of the campus, and she'd stayed on the corner trying to snag a few extra dollar bills in the hat at her feet. Foley, breaking his routine of pretending to ignore her, stopped and dug out his wallet. His budget said no, but he was flying now without a net, and the single ten he found was screaming to be jettisoned. Rather, something was screaming inside Foley to do any old crazy thing that would give a final note to his exit.

In the midst of a verse, she inserted with her speaking voice, "Thank you and have a great daayyy!" returning then to the melody. Her eyes followed him, open lips spreading wide to leave him a complementary grin.

Foley was captivated by her waist-length dark hair. Though some guys talked of T's and A's, without a substantial amount of hair, he felt, the rest played out as so many interconnected hyperbolic paraboloids – bare curvatures of a sculpture in space but with no fountain overflowing.

Foley stopped in at Cooper's Supermarket with a mental list of what would stock his refrigerator for the remainder of the week. Scanning the freezers to determine what flavor of ice cream to binge on, he sensed someone floating toward him from down the aisle.

"I want to thank you so much for your generosity," the girl, rather woman, spoke excitedly. None of his female students had ever enveloped him with such eyes, not even over grade

improvements. “You don’t know how much that meant to me.”

Perhaps it was the store’s lighting which prevented Foley from seeing her as that performer from the sidewalk, the one he’d tipped with his last bill. Her hair color had seemed darker in the afternoon sun. With some reflection, it came back to him. “Oh, you’re quite welcome … Miss …?”

“Cassandra,” she said. “But everybody calls me Sandy. I’ve seen you walking passed everyday, caught up in your own business. But today, well, … you made mine. Thank you.”

“You know, I like it,” Foley said. “Cassandra sounds kinda … I don’t know, like an exotic flower.”

“Really? Aw, that’s so sweet. And yours?”

“Foley. I teach … used to teach in the math department.”

“Foley, alright! Well anyway, I hope you’ll stop more often and give me a real listen. As a matter of fact, I’m playing Friday night at Wooster’s. You should come then.”

“Well, I don’t do the social scene much anymore.”

“Just bring a friend along, if you’re uncomfortable coming by yourself. I’d really like to see you there. You’re almost like my first real fan … I mean, outside of my boyfriend, that is. Say you’ll come.”

“Well, … OK, I’ll try.”

“Great! Awesome! See you then.”

It wasn’t hard for Foley to narrow down his list of friends. Like the square root of negative-one, hard to fathom but easy to imagine. The way she’d bragged over him, he couldn’t let her down. So, the next day, on the pretense of forgetting something, he returned to the faculty office of the mathematics department.

“Mister Jameson,” said Dr. Singh upon seeing him. “Was there something else I could help you with?”

“No ma’am. I just … needed to give Werner back his pen. I borrowed it when mine ran out and forgot to return it.”

“I believe he has a class right now. If you leave it with me, I’ll be sure he gets it.”

“You know what?” Foley said, patting his pockets, “I think I left it in the car. I’ll be right back.”

Foley peeked into each classroom he passed. He met Werner coming out of the men’s restroom. “Werner!”

“Hey, man, what’s up? They call you back?”

“Listen, I … step over here a moment. You don’t have plans for

Friday night, do you?”

Each having paid his own cover charge, the waitress led the two young men to a table near the back wall. Werner ordered drinks, while Foley tried steadying his nerves.

“So,” Werner began, “you’ve heard her sing before. Is she good?”

“I’m not really a good judge of music,” replied Foley. “I guess she’s pretty good.”

“Uh-huh. Pretty as in ‘I’d really like to date her, but I’m just a nerd without a gig,’ or something like that.”

“She has a boyfriend already. And I’m not that much of a nerd. Am I?”

“Got it written all over your face, man. You’ve got the hots for her, admit it.”

“I mean, she’s pretty and all, and I like her name. But I don’t want to step on some guy’s toes, especially if he’s the jealous type.”

“Well, I guess you’re about to find out. Here they come.”

Sandy stepped up onto the small stage with her guitar. A guy, seemingly the boyfriend, got her a stool, placed the mic, then whispered something in her ear before quickly settling in a chair off to the side.

“Thanks, guys,” she began. “This is my debut, so I hope ya’ll enjoy it.”

The boyfriend whistled and clapped solo.

“Alright!” Sandy hollered. “Let’s get this started.”

She played and sang for about half an hour, during which Foley’s eyes never left her. In the two years they’d worked together, Werner had never seen his former colleague so wrapped up in anything beyond explaining solutions to polynomials and linear equations.

The crowd was profuse with accolades of applause and hoots and whistles.

"I guess we can go now," Foley said. "I'll get the tab."

"Don't you want to go meet her?" Werner said, shoving his shoulder. "Go on! I've got this one, man."

There were a number of people ahead of Foley in the back hallway. The boyfriend was talking with another guy in the corner. Foley was about to leave.

"Hey! Foley!" Sandy shouted over the throng. "Come here!" She waved him over. "So good you came. Means a lot to me."

"I really liked your songs," he said.

"Well, most are not mine. I ended with one I recently wrote."

Some of the women said to her, "Sandy, you really need to try the Fairfield. You'll get a bigger crowd. We'll tell everybody."

"Sandy, come here!" That was the boyfriend. "Someone wants to talk with you."

"Sorry, guys," she said. "Duty calls. Bye, Foley!"

The crowd of people filled up the space between Foley and the departing Sandy. He turned and went in search of Werner.

The following Monday, Foley sat in front of the student union. He waited till after 1:00, but Sandy never showed up to sing and play.

In fact, he would not see her face again for another two years. He'd gotten a job working the sales floor of an electronics dealer. All the big screens were playing the same midday newscast. There was video of her performing before a packed stadium, with hair neck-length and tomato-red. The caption displayed her stage-name, Sienna Dare. Foley had no idea who he was watching and went back to stocking phone covers. It then cut to the scene of a slick roadway crowded with emergency crews. Next came the shot of a bus in a ravine, its front-end smashed in by an eighteen-wheeler still jack-knifed on the roadway.

Two days later, he met Werner coming out of a Stop-n-Go.

"Foley?" Werner called.

Foley turned and squinted, then took Werner's extended hand. "Well, I'll be."

"I hardly knew you without your beard and all. How've you been, man?"

"Not too bad. How's the math world?"

"I've been bucking for associate professor, but Singh's got her

favorite already in the pipeline. Actually, I wanted to give you a call, see if you were alright and all."

Foley shrugged. "Like I said, I've been doing OK."

"I mean, it must've tore you up."

"What did?"

"You've heard about that singer Sienna Dare, haven't you?"

"There was something in the news, yeah."

"That's your girl Sandy. Didn't you know?"

To her millions of fans online and off, she'd been Sienna Dare, reaching two billion streams with her latest single, "Make It So", selling out the Superdome in New Orleans in one day, being nominated for a Grammy for Best New Artist, and finalizing plans for a world-wide tour.

To Foley, she'd been the girl with the guitar, the long dark hair and the prettiest name, Cassandra. After questioning Werner, researching news sites, querying a map app, and getting off work at 6:30, he drove in the dark and the endless rain the ninety miles to the hospital they'd transported her to after two hours in surgery. The woman at the front desk could not authorize visitation without his giving her full name. All he knew was Cassandra. On top of which, visiting hours for ICU would end in the next thirty minutes. She advised him to try again in the morning.

As he'd done before, Foley turned and looked behind and wondered if he'd only imagined a tightrope and had actually been walking on air. Had it simply been her voice, her hair and her name he'd been in love with from the start? Who was Cassandra? Before the world, she'd donned a mask, changed her name and played a part. Now, that one's career lay totaled at the bottom of a ravine.

Foley couldn't help noticing the crowd gathered up and down the lobby area, mostly young and female sitting or sleeping on the

floor, with press people interviewing fans who'd traveled hundreds of miles further than he had. If half had shown up for his lecture two years earlier, he might've made full professor by now, had an office of his own and a pack of graduate assistants.

The elevator dinged and its doors rumbled open. Out came a man with a bruised face and his lower leg in a cast, being pushed in a wheelchair. Press people swarmed him, bringing up cameras and lighting and aiming microphones.

Amid a flurry of questions, the man raised a hand and quickly won their silence. "It's too soon to say," he said. "They've done as much as they could. I want to thank everyone on Cee's behalf for all your wonderful prayers and support. I'm sure she's picking up the vibe quite well. It's the best medicine right now. Thank you. Let's go."

When the man had emerged and moved near the door to await a car's arrival, Foley recognized him as the boyfriend from the bar. He walked over and said, "Excuse me, sir. How is Cassandra?"

"Who?" he responded. "I don't know anyone by that name. Sorry, buddy, you must have me confused with somebody else." He returned to staring through the glass doors at the outer darkness. A car pulled under the canopy, and he was whisked out and helped in.

Foley had backed away with apologies and wandered down the front hallway past more people sitting on the carpet and talking near the tall windows. He ascended the stairs leading up to the second-floor landing and sat down in the empty waiting area. The cushioned seat seemed comfortable enough, since he had no plans but to stay the night and wait for news in the morning. He picked up an entertainment magazine, her image on its front cover – rather, the image of someone named Sienna Dare, with short spiky red hair, bare shoulders protruding from a leather jacket, laughing. Nothing but the eyes were recognizable, those eyes which had enveloped him with gratitude that day in the grocery store.

A young short woman in a hooded raincoat appeared from the stairway, spotted him and walked over, smiling. "Hello. I hope you don't mind, but I heard you asking about Cassandra earlier. Do you know her?"

"Not that well," said Foley. "I taught math at Durham, and often saw her performing on campus. She told me her name once, but …" He stared down at the magazine cover. "I guess I really didn't know her that well."

“I’m Gail,” the woman said, seating herself. “I’m her sister. Do you mind if I ask your name?”

“Foley. Foley Jameson.” He took her extended hand, squeezing it. Gail squeezed back and kept holding onto his. She had wavy auburn hair and smelled like the rain.

“I feel like I know you from somewhere,” she said. “Didn’t you used to have a beard?”

“Back when I was teaching, yes.”

“I believe I took a class with you one time. Calculus, I think it was. It was probably the funnest class I had all semester. You made it so interesting. You seemed to have a passion for the stuff.”

“I liked teaching calculus. It’s all about understanding changes in motion, which is perhaps what life is about. Nothing ever stays in the same place or direction for long. There’s always something else, or something intrinsic steering things into new paths.”

“That is so beautiful! That’s what I so liked about how you taught it. You see, I was an art major. After taking your course, I started looking at things in a different way, catching the subtle changes even in how plants took their shapes from the light. People, too, their faces and hands etched with experiences. You made me see how one thing could affect the course of another, even in the most minute way.”

Foley noticed how she had not let go of his hand, emphasizing each expression with a squeeze. They talked into the night, about Cassandra, about nature, about the mutual influences of science and art.

Around 2:30 in the morning, there was a stirring downstairs. One of the reporters had heard from a nurse how Sienna Dare’s vitals had plummeted and she’d been placed on life support. The young men and women lining the walls were hugging and crying. One girl came up and told Gail. Foley placed an arm across her shoulders, and she took his hand in both of hers.

Foley woke up first and turned his face toward the growing light through the windows. His stirring woke Gail, and both decided to go somewhere for breakfast. They didn’t talk much while eating, but Gail seemed insistent that Foley stay with her. He’d mentioned having to hurry back to go to work, so she pulled out her phone and started showing him photos of her and Cassandra, their mother, Cassandra’s baby boy.

They returned to the hospital and were approaching the

entrance where numerous people were gathered. A reporter stood nearby talking into a camera with the news of Sienna Dare's succumbing to heart failure. Gail sunk into Foley's chest, bawling.

For Foley, what had begun with dropping a ten dollar bill into a hat ended with one student showing up late for his lecture and turning it into a standing discourse on life and love.

He couldn't recall the instant it occurred, but the blueness of the sky had never before made him want to go and swim in it.

One Fine Place

The assistant director greeted her in the lobby and instructed one of the male ushers to show the young woman to the reception suite. Its sitting area held plush chairs and love-seats, though none as yet occupied. A black baby grand awaited her in the corner between two sets of french doors. Through an adjoining door, several cloth-laden tables fronted a long counter bearing food platters and bowls wrapped in cellophane. She'd made sure to eat something before she came.

She left her music binder to rest on the piano's stand and stood gazing through one of the outer doors at the patio area set with wrought iron tables and chairs and various potted plants. The early afternoon light left impressions of oak branches on the brick palisade. "Sure would make one fine place to settle down," she mused, "if it weren't for all those ugly stones out there."

A returning procession of cars and pickups marched past and into the front parking area. Beyond the drive, there stretched the grounds scattered with evenly spaced limestone plaques for each person firmly planted in earthly repose for the rest of time.

The sight sickened her.

A middle-aged woman in light blue with a corsage appeared in the main doorway. "Oh, Gillian, you're here." She glanced behind, then said, "We just got back and they're on their way. You can start whenever you like."

Before Carolyn had first approached her talented neighbor about playing the post-burial reception, she had been letting the young pianist into the Durham Baptist Church on Saturday's to practice on

the Steinway used for Sunday services. Nothing further was required except to make sure the lights were out and the self-locking side door pulled shut. Gillian would then be left to herself, no one to disturb her. She'd stay there for two maybe three hours, only rising from the bench for restroom breaks. Her only companion, Frederic Chopin's Nocturne in D-flat.

Perhaps as a return favor, Gillian assumed, Carolyn expected her to tackle the complete list of songs she'd left with her. Perhaps, too, out of a further gesture, the older woman was proposing to pay the young woman only because Gillian appeared in need of money, offering her $100 for one hour's worth of instrumental entertainment. Feeling thus obligated to give it a go, as well as tremendously grateful for the gesture, Gillian spent the previous evening scouring the net for sheet music and printed out about 90% of the total. The next morning, she pretended to her boss to be sick, then ran through the whole collection on her electric keyboard till noon.

While preparing lunch, Gillian scanned for the hundredth time the MacDowell Piano Competition flier stuck to the refrigerator door, especially marking the dollar figure for the entry fee. The due date gave Thursday. She had been sick for real for two days the previous week, following a Monday holiday, resulting in collateral damage to last Friday's paycheck. She needed this gig. Finished eating, Gillian headed out for the six-block drive to Sweet Memories Funeral Home.

The hired pianist now seated herself behind the keyboard and opened the binder. Part way into Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'", her peripheral vision picked up figures, two or three at a time, wandering in. Some sat down nearby and chatted, while most filed into the dining area. The den of voices mounted, but she kept her

dynamics subdued for the sake of avoiding complaints. After all, this was not a performance to exhibit her talent and skills. She was there simply to supply atmosphere, with the same purpose for which the flower arrangements lining the walls had been selected. Carolyn had assured her that no one was there to judge, all well informed in advance that Ben would've approved.

To contrast with the upbeat opening number, she chose Bread's "If" to soften things a bit. An elderly gentleman came and placed a filled wine glass on the piano's edge and winked at her. She smiled and nodded to the gesture. As was her habit, Gillian gently swayed in rhythm with the music's phrasing. A woman about twice her age was seated nearby, holding a glass of her own, and appeared to be swaying along while struggling to keep the corners of her lips from turning downward.

Carolyn came around and leaned in close, whispering, "Just so you know, Ben's ex-wife is loving this one so much she's stopped listening to her boyfriend's jabbering. You're working magic, honey. Keep it up!"

Gillian felt a trembling enter her fingers, rendering them harder to control. She tried breathing deeply to compensate. Holding down the sustain pedal to let the final chord fade on its own, she took sips from the glass of wine. She wished Carolyn hadn't said anything, had just let her stay aloof in the little corner, preferably oblivious to her audience's presence.

Gillian turned a page. Abba's "The Winner Takes It All" seemed to hit too close to home. So, she flipped another over and found John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads".

"This one'll cheer them up," she said. Her fingers were dancing now, recovered from their former jitters.

While she played, a heavy-set man came in carrying a saucer of food and plopped down in one of the chairs. At the repeat of the chorus, he sang along, "Country roads … taken Ben home … to the place … where he belongs … Louisiana … not Alabama …"

Someone in the dining area shouted, "Woooo-hoo!"

"Take him home … country roads …"

A woman stuck her head through the doorway. "Y'all are nothing but a bunch of LSU freaks, you know that?"

Another woman chimed, "Ben really loved his Tiger football, that's for sure."

The heavy-set man said to Gillian, "Why don't you play us

another one there, uh, Miss, uh …"

Carolyn walked back over. "Everybody. This is Gillian. She's Rick's … y'all know Rick, don't y'all?"

Gillian looked up at her and shook her head.

"Oh, sorry. Well, anyway, she has a whole book here of Ben's favorites. Anything y'all want to hear, just ask Gillian."

She hoped no one else would ask about the man she'd been living with who had packed his things on Saturday morning and gotten into a car driven by a woman in sleeveless halter, bracelets and long pink nails. He'd complained about their not spending enough time together on the weekends. The only real way she'd figured to deal with the pain of seeing him leave was to head to the church with the D-flat Nocturne and let the melodic runs and the hypnotic shimmering of the harmony absorb whatever tears persisted.

"How about something with a local flavor?" the woman who had swayed with her asked.

She recalled one and began flipping back some pages. Strangely, it had been the only one on the list hardest to find sheet music for — Le Roux's "New Orleans Ladies". Afterward, she continued with the one following it, Jimmy Davis' "You Are My Sunshine", and soon had the whole room singing along.

By 2:00, though some lingered in the dining area still talking over coffee, most people had departed. Gillian took up the binder and went in search of Carolyn.

"Oh, Gillian!" the woman said, meeting her at the doorway. "I want you to know you did a wonderful job. I had a number of people say how they were so pleased to have stayed. Now, before you leave, I have just one last favor to ask."

Carolyn led her out to the parking lot. They got into the woman's car and rode around the grounds till coming to a spot near a large shade tree. A truck and trailer were just pulling off, loaded with a backhoe. A small mound of clay remained under a dark green canopy several yards up the slope of grass.

Gillian was careful to side-step the other markers on the way up, as the woman in blue led the way. She then stood next to her older friend, facing the mound.

Carolyn sighed and said, "Before he passed, I told Ben about your upcoming competition, how you'd been practicing so hard for it. Just so you know, it wasn't my idea to have you here today.

Don’t get me wrong. Ben didn’t know a single lick of music. All he knew how to play was the radio, after all. I didn’t even have to suggest it. That’s why …” She pulled a check from her purse and handed it to Gillian. It bore Ben Goddard’s scraggly signature.

When the younger woman read the figure, she felt like her knees were about to buckle from under her. She wrapped her arms around the older one’s neck and kissed her cheek.

“So sorry I had to pretend to you, honey,” Carolyn said. “Buy you something really nice to wear before you go. OK?”

The following Sunday, the day after she’d performed the Chopin and saw her name listed third in the rankings, Gillian bought batteries for her keyboard and headed back to Sweet Memories. Setting up the stand and chair next to his mound, she flipped through the binder to the page and began playing, singing along, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me …”

The Artist
a parable

The artist, driven by the scourge of a restless conscience, went down and sat beside a river, the same river over which the world's traffic crossed by a bridge hundreds of times in a week; and there, he gathered from the talk of those waters such news as had never before reached the ears of any commuter caught in the ever churning flow overhead. With a bucket he had brought along for the purpose, the artist proceeded to draw and carry up load after load of river water to the roadway, splashing passing windshields with it — an activity one might think was meant to effect some sort of purging of his conscience.

Instead, with each flinging of the bucket, what the artist sensed was that river captured in memory, that once solitary thread of his being, being melted, clarified, and spread over countless glass surfaces, as if the emptying of a bucket meant some portion of all his inner hours of joy and suffering had to be poured out before the horrified and indignant eyes of a cowardly world.

Most bridge-farers thought the artist mad, hurling their curses and honking their collective horns at him without reserve, while some few mouthed their gratitude for the visual cleansing. Only, the artist took all such as necessary reactions to the river's momentous news, how the rest of the world, once flying past so unconcernedly, needed to be greeted with the shallowness of its convictions.

And along with each wearying chug from the bucket, the artist was sure to add, "What made you think you could escape the floods of truth mounting the pylons of your rickety assumptions, right down there below your very feet?"

Driver Unrestrained

Driver had come to the conclusion that there were no less than three things one needed to prepare for the end of the world — or perhaps even four, or maybe hold off on that third one since she couldn't think of what it had been at the moment. Yet she held firm to those first two which she knew without a doubt would get anyone through any general upheaval of society.

Number one was toilet paper. If a major breakdown of civilization were to find people resorting to digging holes in their backyards, what better resource was there for upholding one's sense of decency? Optimizing space for stacks of economy packs would require some engineering. Still, a considerable supply of toilet paper was tops, ensuring that both ends of the anatomy were kept sanitary while providing ample media for a day-to-day account of one's struggles through the dystopian nightmare.

Number two? Water. Of course, water. Yet once again, a bit of a challenge to maximize space for all those gallon jugs and 24-bottle packs, not to mention having to haul buggy-full after buggy-full out to one's car without drawing too much attention.

She would try to remember number three after getting through with the last customer in line at the convenience store where she cashiered.

And what had happened to this normally sane woman of 42 to convert her from optimist to pessimist and make her think things might be headed toward shits-ville? Driver had called it a *revelation*. It occurred to her after she'd put in an online application for the new superstore they were planning to build across from the civic center, and the AI for the site kept substituting "Marvin" for every time she tried typing "Marilyn". The scenario went something like this: machines were set to take over; people would call their congresspersons to complain; machines would make it so the people who called their congresspersons were arrested or killed or replaced with a machine; and nothing would appear in the news until it was too late, by which time the machines would be controlling the news outlets and so nothing would get out about it anyway. The whole thing would come crashing down out of nowhere, and the few who

had been visionary enough to prepare would get labeled “non-essentials” and be hunted like vermin.

Back to the third thing, which most would’ve assumed meant food or batteries or fuel for a portable cook-stove. But no, number three, which she happened upon again while driving home, could be none other than a partner of some kind. Not a pet, though having a dog around to bark whenever the drones started surveilling the neighborhood was not a bad idea. One would need some like-minded individual to share the load and the weary hours with. For Driver lived alone, but saw no point in having to endure the apocalypse by herself inside a dark and empty apartment. To add flavor, number three seemed like genius, since it could also bring with it number four — that is, had she thought to extend the list that far instead of it so beautifully extending itself. And what was number four? That should’ve been clear enough to anyone able to discern what hopes she envisioned for number three, when she went and exposed her heart and her best selfie on a dating site after supper that evening.

Driver felt in desperate need of number four, which no warm-blooded female had hope of satisfying without number three. Others might have — and there were a few she knew of or had heard of who seemed content enough — but she couldn’t see herself handling it alone any longer, and would’ve sooner surrendered to the machines than try to survive as a nun. The only limitation she saw to securing number four was, as with toilet paper and water, finding enough space in her bed for the right number three. It might’ve meant getting a bigger bed, something which she wasn’t sure she could afford at the moment. But perhaps number three would help out, especially if number three were looking forward to number four as much as Driver was.

And how would Driver appear to any warm-blooded male, if the machine kept giving her first name as “Marvin” instead of “Marilyn”? How could she then convince number three that she was not a he, and so he shouldn’t get the wrong idea and run off? And would she have to go after him to prove her case? She would rather he came after her, since Driver was leery of traveling to some strange place and finding out that a quick and shallow number four was all number three had in mind of doing. Again, she needed someone to help bear the load when the world went to crap.

Driver wanted to cry after messaging three attractive prospects,

sharing her revelation and subsequent plans, then seeing all three initial requests denied. But there were more fish in the pond, she told herself, and began casting for the next three. The first and only one to respond had somehow misread her intentions as wanting to repopulate the planet and suggested she needed to recruit other younger and more fertile females to form a commune with her as plow-horse and him as lord and master. Again, she cried. She pleaded with the universe: were there no men left out there brave enough to face and handle a woman on equal terms? Still, she would message and wait on another three before calling it a night. Her eye-lids, though already begging for sleep, soon popped back open at the sight of her inbox flashing.

Mike said he meant no offense toward her honest intentions but felt she'd misinterpreted the state of things in the world and wanted to meet to discuss other more practical options. He was widowed, had a teenage daughter in need of a stable mother-figure, and wondered whether it would be within her means to drive twenty miles so he could grill some steaks for the three of them — and did she like horses?

The directions he'd shared left her nervous. The route would take her at least eight miles into rural territory she never knew existed. Driver almost had a change of heart after passing up the first turn and not realizing it until she came to a dead-end and found so little room there to turn around. But after she found it again, the way then seemed to speak for itself and brought her to an open gate and a path to a ranch-style brick house surrounded by acres of rolling fields littered with large round bales of hay.

He was seated in a rocking chair on the front porch, getting up before Driver could come to a stop beside his pickup. She sat for a moment in the car, taking a few deep breaths before daring to open

the door and step out. She remembered viewing with suspicion the picture Mike included with his profile, since it showed a slim yet muscular build in jeans, long-sleeved button-down shirt and white cowboy hat, leading her to think he'd ripped it from the profile of some country music star. The caption had stated it was eight years old, and not to be too disappointed if he'd gained some extra pounds since. He had, but not in an unsightly way — at least not to Driver's eyes. For here he stood waiting for her, wearing a ball cap, t-shirt and cut-offs, yet bearing a manly figure which she wouldn't have minded taking with her to the beach — that is, if he didn't mind being with a woman who filled out a one-piece with a less than perfect figure herself.

As soon as Driver took hold of Mike's extended hand, he wanted to know: Did she have trouble finding the place? Would she care for a beer? How did she like her steak?

A girl in a ponytail emerged from the front door. She appeared shy at first, but, back of the house on the patio, came to life, wanting to show Driver her crochet work, introduce her to her horse Silverado, ask her what kind of music and movies she liked. It seemed at first Driver spent more time with Sally than with Mike who was kept busy with the grill. Indeed, Sally made sure to keep their guest well received and entertained.

As time advanced, the woman had almost forgotten her name was Driver, responding more and more to "Miss Marilyn, try this casserole I made", "Miss Marilyn, try this hat on", "Miss Marilyn, you've got to let me teach you how to ride", "Miss Marilyn, why don't you stay over so we can watch a movie together?"

After they'd eaten, and when she had finally gotten separated from Sally by a phone call from the girl's boyfriend, Mike invited Marilyn to take a walk with him to see the barn. He wanted to convince her that the world was not coming to an end, that country living provided a more peaceful alternative to apartment life, and yes, he did have a bed too large for just one person. This last suggestion made her the most nervous, wondering if he was moving a bit too fast — rather, slower than she secretly wanted him to.

Revolution? Apocalypse? Technocracy? Mike eliminated these one by one from Marilyn's vocabulary. He said it had been too long since he could remember what it felt like. She said it was time they both learned again. And there would be arguments. But they shook on it, that there would be no river too tough to ford, if the two …

no, the three of them worked together. She insisted on including Sally whom she thought the sweetest daughter a man like him could've been blessed to raise.

Sally found them walking and holding hands, insisted Marilyn would be hers for the rest of the day and that it was time to receive her first lesson in horse-back riding. Mike saddled up Wildflower, while Sally brought up Silverado. She rode beside her into the pasture, giving Marilyn pointers on how to hold the reins and get better control of her mount. Then, the two of them started galloping, Wildflower taking the lead.

Marilyn never felt more charged and unfettered in all her solitary years since Boyd had passed. The strictures she had once placed on herself of never finding another like him were now cast off, and she was at last breathing fresh sweet air again. And knowing love again, herself included.

Possessed by the Skies

The window of my dormitory room framed a sky as blank as a sheet of copier paper. I was in my third year at Durham as a math major. The Saturday morning air outside stayed bitterly cold the whole time I'd been plotting derivatives — ever since about 8:00, in fact — on what had started out as yet another blank sheet. To cool my brain down, I took a break, bundled up, and headed over to the university library in search of nothing having to do with math or science or philosophy. Nothing cerebral. Searching the humanities stacks, I found a collection of poems by Dylan Thomas and brought this back to my room, my cave, to gnaw on for breakfast. The book's tangle of metaphors was tough chewing, let me tell you.

The portable TV in my room stayed on the whole time. In that day and age, it seemed prevalent enough to assume that whatever headline got piped out of any network news outlet had to be believed without a doubt. Believe it, some had said, or you're not living in the modern world. And there was a certain admonition in the telling, despite my seeing these incredible images appearing on the screen, broadcast supposedly from thousands of miles from where I was sitting and plodding through those widening poetical vistas. "Because the magic box does not lie," those same voices reiterated in my head. Yet, I could've said the same thing about my window, from when earlier I'd seen a raggedy man shuffling his way down the back lot, trying every knob on every door to see if it would magically open for him. And my window didn't lie, either.

Having propped up a pillow, I could now test more of my mettle on Thomas' poem "Before I knocked". Outside the same window now, an icy wind prowled. But under the lamp over my bed, it felt so warm and safe.

"Jamie-San!" Once more, Nao's voice beckoned from the outer side of my door. Only afterward did she herself knock. Nao was a classmate, a Japanese exchange student. She would wait for half a minute then leave, if I didn't open to her. When I did, she extended her arms and thrust a sheet of paper up into my face. It was her Algebra II worksheet, 10% completed. 10%, only because I had already filled in two of the answers for her and was trying my best

to convey that she needed to do the rest for herself. She grinned as a kind of down-payment for my doing so again with the third problem.

"Are you even trying?" I queried, seemingly to deaf ears.

She merely pointed to the sheet and tacked on a "ha-ha!" as if offering the first installment of interest. In fact, she'd been making these little contributions to her favors account ever since the previous evening. I should've had enough by now to buy both of us lunch, if smiles and giggles had been valid currency at the Herbie's in the university student center.

I should also point out that Nao spoke no English — at least, to me she hadn't. How she'd gotten into Durham on a scholarship had to have been as magical as my tuning in WFMJ-TV all the way out of Youngstown. One of the girls in calculus class had cited nepotism over magic, having heard that the university president's gardener was Nao's uncle. On top of which, she owned a laptop with unlimited wifi access, while I had to keep shelling out three dollars an hour to use the desktop in the student lounge in the math department. I would've asked to borrow hers sometime — and I'm sure she wouldn't have minded — except that the letter keys were all stamped with hiragana characters.

I pulled a pen from my shirt pocket and turned the sheet so she could see what I was being so generous enough to show her. "See, if you carry this expression over here and divide both sides by this variable, you'll solve for this expression right here."

Nao nodded at intervals which never quite jived with the jabs of my pen against the sheet. Her subsequent gesturing with both hands was a way of saying, "I want to see you do it, you're so smart." A bit of an ego booster, I had to admit, especially coming from someone as cute as Nao was. The top of her head reached just barely up to my chest, with its dark disheveled hair and shiny charcoal briquettes for irises.

Actually, what my ego should've been asking for was a cognitive evaluation, since I found myself for the third and probably not the last time that day surrendering to said-cuteness by working out the problem and filling in the blank for her. With the thing back in her happy hands, she then bowed to me three times and headed back to her room down the hallway.

Unsurprisingly, this little tune had been danced to more than once before. Perhaps the little ditty's history could've be traced

back to two weeks earlier, when I'd seen her having trouble with her bicycle, offered to look at it, and found that the chain had simply come loose from the axle gear. We'd already been attending some of the same classes but without having exchanged a single word until that day. And the only word out of her mouth after I'd realigned the chain was something which sounded like "alligator", punctuated with repeated bows. Her being Japanese, I later tried speaking "alligator" into a translator app and got back five characters which processed as "thank you" in English.

I soon asked around and learned her name. She learned mine, Jameson, from when an instructor had once called on me, but mistook the last syllable for an honorific. It was not long afterward that Nao was calling on "Jamie-San" to help with any and every problem of hers, course-related or otherwise. I'd become her how-to-go-to on two legs.

Back again to how any televised news story spread from one side of the planet to another got thus deemed as truth, that day was cold April 16th, but the screen on my portable showed large-scale demonstrations being held in Beijing and people in short-sleeves and sweating like the middle of July. Could the magic box be doubted, I wondered, when even the anchors were insisting this was happening right then? And as for those various shots of mass gatherings all across the country over there, could these have really been baffling politicians as well as inciting sympathetic demonstrations among the younger generation all the way over here?

I'd laid aside the book of poems and become so absorbed in those images of revolution and transformation, that I hardly heard the tapping on my door. When I opened it, there stood Nao again. She had the worksheet in her hands but folded around some object this time. After scanning the hallway, she slipped through the door and right past me. This intrusion was a first, since the tiny exchange student had never before seemed to express any interest in visiting her helper's room, despite his having often visited hers for occasional though pointless tutoring sessions.

The cute one motioned for me to sit on the bed, turned off the lamp, and in the near-dimness shed the paper from the object. It was a round box of some sort which she then switched on, causing it to emit sounds of ocean surf. Nao seated herself beside me, placing the box near our feet on the floor.

She said nothing for a few minutes. Even before she'd taken hold of my hand, my mind was already generating its own crazy notions of how Nao had come to reward my abundant kindnesses with a romantic evening together. But such turned out to be anything but.

"My name is Huang Li," she said, speaking perfect English with a high-pitched twangy voice. "I am an agent of my country's Ministry of State Security, comparable to your country's Central Intelligence Agency. I have placed this device to cloak our conversation. Do you understand me thus far?"

"Yeah, I guess so. You're a spy, then?"

"Infiltrator. I monitor dissident activities on campus and in the local Chinese community. But that is not the reason I am speaking to you right now. To put it bluntly, I need your help to leave the country. Will you help me?"

I could detect through her hand a definite trembling within Nao's body. I continued to think of her as Nao, since I hadn't yet adjusted to this new persona, and the Chinese name she'd given had already slipped out of recollection.

I queried my clandestine visitor, "You want me to … help you cross the border? Are you serious?"

"I have cash which I will give you to compensate. All I need is for you to accompany me as though we are visiting Mexico together. You will pretend to be my husband. Will you agree to do this for me?"

(…*for me?*)

What had I not done for her? She'd been like a pestering child those past several days, and I'd grown weary of the clinginess, without the slightest effort on her part to fend for herself.

I then asked, "Aren't there people from your Ministry who can help you?"

"My country is in transition at the moment," she replied. "If I try to contact my superiors, the new regime will detect this and have me detained and deported. I worked for their predecessors, after all. Actually, I had plans to defect to your country. But now, I do not … I feel I will not be allowed."

"Argh! Why me? Why do I have to do everything for you? Or have you been pretending this whole time?"

"I had to convince you and others that I was a Japanese exchange student who could speak no English. That was my cover. But I have no one else I can turn to now. If I go to other Chinese

students, they will know that I was working against them and will … mistreat me. I am sorry for having used you. Please do not hate me."

My brain, exhausted from dining on poetic hard-tack and aborted espionage, went in search of something more succulent for my stomach to process.

"Man, I'm hungry," I said. "Are you hungry?"

Nao returned to her room for her protective gear. I slipped on and zipped up the parka I'd ordered through a catalog, then squeezed my head into the thick knit cap my sister had given me for Christmas. We crossed the street, navigated the network of walkways, and entered the university center. Nao said she had cash, so my hopes were that she would spring for both of us, considering I had only four dollar bills left in my wallet.

To my astonishment, Nao inserted herself between me and the counter and handed a twenty to the cashier. It was the first time I'd ever seen her do anything on her own. I then followed her all the way to the far end of the lounge. My Chinese infiltrator seemed intent on distancing us from what was left of the lunch crowd.

I hadn't even unwrapped my burger yet, and Nao was already biting into her chicken sandwich like a starving dog.

"Is it good?" I asked.

She took a minute to swallow, sipped from her drink, then said, "I have not eaten since Thursday."

"You mean no food for two days? You have money. Why didn't you …"

"I have not left my room except to visit yours. I was not sure I should venture out. There are too many variables right now."

After chewing on some burger, I queried, "So, what are your plans, once you're in Mexico? Or is that top secret?"

"I do not know," she replied. "Normally, I rely on my superiors to inform me of changes to my itinerary. It is how I have been living, day to day. However, I have not heard from them for five days. I felt that I needed to act on my own. The decision to do so has taken time. Jamie-San, do you believe in destiny?"

"Well, I've felt destined to have to keep solving one problem after another for you, wondering when you were going to stand on your own. But it turns out you've been fooling me this whole time. So, I have to wonder if you had a valid reason for choosing me instead of someone else. I mean, what are the probable

distributions? Out of all the hundreds of students on campus, you picked me as the likeliest random variable, which tells me it wasn't really that random at all."

"Jamie-San, you must understand. My life has been nothing if not guided by my loyalty to the Party's objectives. I was ready to betray those, when I had decided to defect. But now, I have no choice but to seek a new path for myself. It is … frightening."

"And you needed my help, to know what it feels like to go it on your own, to not let others tell you where to go and what to do. I know. I've been … thinking on that myself for quite some time now. I've had enough of trying to keep up a certain grade point average. Grades suck! I want to do something with my life. It's … like I'm at a turning point — keep going the way others expect me to, or head off in a different direction. You're right, it's scary. I wonder what I'll do for money. I could go live with my parents for a while. But then what?"

"You live in a country where you are free to do that. I do not. And I am far from my home and family. The only safety I see is in fleeing to another locale, before the new regime releases to your government a list of operatives living abroad. I am sure that is coming."

"I still don't …"

"You have been like a lighthouse in a storm for me, since that day you fixed my bicycle. I have no real friends here other than you. But if you are now regretting my having chosen you …"

Nao propped her elbow on the table and rested her chin, sighing and staring at the other students eating or talking or studying.

I continued taking bites of my burger.

We were walking back. The sky had cleared and the sunlight felt good against my skin. Still, that brisk breeze snapped at me, as I'm

sure it did Nao.

"I have to apologize to you," she said after a while. "Actually, I do not believe we choose our friends. There is some other connective force in the universe that draws two people together. You can call it randomness, if you like. I believe the universe has a mind and sorts us like socks in a drawer. You laugh. But have you not heard of quantum entanglement? You and I are two peas in a pod, as you say in English. I sensed that as soon as I met you."

"Quantum entanglement," I repeated. "I'll have to look that one up. Sounds like a poem I was reading earlier, 'Love in the Asylum'. I don't remember the complete verse, but it mentions the 'vision that set fire to the stars', or something like that. I'm not sure what that means, how a vision can set things on fire. The only thing I could think of was from reading Superman comics where he could start a fire with his eyes."

"There is also that painting by Van Gogh, 'Starry Night', where the stars are swirling in the sky. Perhaps it is like that."

"You must be into art, then."

"If I had defected, I would have quit mathematics and changed my major to art. I want to learn to paint like Van Gogh or Matisse or Hokusai."

"So do it."

Nao stopped and looked up at me, then walked over and sat on a bench. "It is so easy for you. 'Do it,' he says. How can you not see that I would have lost my support, if I had went against my assignment? And now, with what is happening …"

I tried to think of the rest of the verse from the poem. "Damn, I wish I had a better memory. It's back in my room, too … 'set fire to the stars', and then what?"

Nao took her phone from a coat pocket. "What is the title?"

"'Love in the Asylum'. Dylan Thomas."

After half a minute's worth of scrolling, she slowed her finger. "Yes. It says the first vision. Is not that the mind of the universe?"

A man was now coming down the walkway, speaking what I figured was Chinese. Nao responded to him in words I couldn't comprehend. He seemed to be scolding her. She got up. "My uncle. He is here to take me where they cannot find me. I must go with him. Arigato, Jamie-San!" She bowed to me, and they walked away together. Just like that.

The wind was still merciless, icy. I turned to head back. So, that

was it, I figured. I'd had her, and then she was gone. What had happened to two peas in a pod and all that?

"Jamie-San!" Nao called after me. "Set fire to the stars!"

A gust of air stirred and set to swirling some dried leaves collected on the walkway between us. She was fleeing like a leaf on the wind now.

Blink

Billieu was nothing more than an old grocery with two gas pumps next to the highway leading to Manning. The store had been closed down for ten years, but then reopened under a new owner, Mister Chesterton, who had a college-educated niece named Kelly Ann whom he somehow then talked into working the register for seven dollars an hour.

Now, her brother Brett had once teased Kelly Ann, telling her, “if you’re ever driving down 42, don’t blink or you’ll miss Billieu.” But in all seriousness, the girl felt, with the day being a sweltering one, that she couldn’t blink nearly enough at seeing that kid in a hooded jacket back there by the beer cooler. With both hands pressed to the countertop, Kelly Ann couldn’t help leaving her mouth hanging open, either.

Here it was the middle of August, and there was this kid in a jacket with the hood pulled over his head, for heaven’s sake!

He paced one way then the other, opening one of the glass doors then closing it, leaving a layer of fog on the inside. His head then pivoted around to eye the brown-haired girl behind the counter.

“Can I help you?” Kelly Ann hollered.

“Uh, no ma’am,” he replied, shaking his hooded head. Done with whatever he was trying to do, the kid swung around and skipped past the counter. She heard him say, “don’t mind me none!” before he’d shoved the door open and was off running somewhere.

Kelly Ann strummed the counter top and ran her tongue inside her still open mouth. “Huh! Somebody must’ve put him up to it. Where do they get off thinking they can send a kid in to buy beer for them? I mean, why don’t you just come in and buy it yourself? And as hot as it is? I swear!”

She hit the button for the cash drawer, straightened some bills, then closed the drawer. With hands upon the counter once more, she stared out the door. Two eighteen-wheelers went flying past, dust sent swirling off the shoulder and into the parking area.

“Uncle Chess!” Kelly Ann hollered toward the back.

“Yeah!” came a man’s loud voice from the storeroom.

“I’ve got to use the restroom.”

“Again? Girl, what do you keep drinking them Mountain Dews for?”

“I’ve really gotta go, okay?”

“Well, go then. I’ll listen for anyone that comes in.”

She wanted to be certain. So, instead of going straight back, she went by way of the coolers first. There in the aisle lay a wad of bills held together by a clip engraved with the initials “CMC”. Having scooped it up, she thumbed through what amounted to a huge stack of hundreds. Kelly Ann sucked in a big gulp of air and held it.

In the restroom, she’d left the wad on the edge of the sink and was staring at it from the toilet. She was still staring at it while washing and drying her hands. With the clip removed and dropped in the sink, Kelly Ann began straightening out, counting and stacking each bill, careful not to let any fall to the floor.

“… eight, nine, ten.” She paused, feeling her hand trembling. “Eleven! Twelve! Thirt…!”

Kelly Ann covered her mouth, hoping no one had heard her. A few bills were still in the other hand. She let out a laugh before gathering them all up. The girl then tried squeezing the whole stack into her tight jeans pocket but soon gave up on that one. Pulling a paper towel from the dispenser, she wrapped up the wad in it instead. As for the clip, she thought to leave it in the trash can, but then thought better, turning and dropping it into the toilet. After sending the thing on its way with a flush, she cracked the door and peered out.

No one appeared to have come in the store yet, and no one was parked outside either. Behind the counter now, Kelly Ann stuffed the thick brown bundle into her purse, caught her breath and stood with hands folded and a smile stuck to her lips. She was in the perfect pose for anyone who might walk in. But then, perhaps too perfect. They’d ask. So, she lost the smile, brushed some hair away and blew out another deep breath.

As she was about to turn and pick up where she’d left off stocking cigarettes, a car pulled up to one of the pumps outside. It was deep purple with sparkling chrome trim. A boom-ba-boomp-booomm shook the store windows for a few seconds then quit.

Kelly Ann moved her purse under the counter.

The door opened and two men in tank-tops came in. They strolled down the middle aisle, picking up and putting back various items along the way.

Kelly Ann pulled a carton from the tote on the floor, opened it and filled an empty slot with packs of Marlboro. She could now see their heads sticking up from the back aisle, mumbling and chuckling to each other, shoes shuffling toward where the kid had been shuffling his earlier. She dug out the last two packs and threw the empty carton away. With the packs pressed between her palms, Kelly Ann looked again. The heads of the men just hovered there, neither one speaking. She looked at the packs between her palms, then the price printed on the slot's tag.

"9 dollars and 61 cents?" she whispered. "How can he afford these, smoking a pack a day like he does?" She was, of course, thinking of her brother who worked for the state police. His partner was always trying to ask her out, too. They would be stopping in close to noon to pick up snacks for lunch. Her watch read 11:36.

"Excuse me, Miss," came a deep smooth voice from the other side of the counter.

The girl went to turn, and the cigarette packs slipped from her hands. "Oh, sorry!" she said, bending to retrieve them. "Can I help you?"

Both men laughed.

Kelly Ann waited, rubbing the two packs together.

"I'd like to ask you," said the one, "if you'd seen my, uh, cousin come in here earlier. He was this short dude wearing a jacket, you see."

Both had their eyes on her. Kelly Ann felt like they were trying to read her, scanning her body and smiling the whole time. She tried not thinking of the purse under the counter, suppressing the image of the bills wrapped in the paper towel even. One of the men must've noticed her glance to one side and stretched his neck to look back toward the storeroom. He wore a gold necklace bearing the initials "CMC".

Placing a hand on the counter and leaning in, the man said, "Look here, Miss, uh …"

Kelly Ann hadn't gotten her name tag printed up yet, so she wore a label her uncle had written her name on.

"… Kelly, darling. Baby. See, my cousin, he might've dropped something of ours back over there. You wouldn't happen to have picked it up by chance, now did you?"

Kelly Ann shrugged and shook her head, massaging the packs with her fingers.

“Now, don’t lie to me, girl,” he continued. “‘Cause I know a pretty thing like you wouldn’t take nothing that wasn’t hers. Am I right?”

“How could I?” she said. “I mean, I’ve been up here the whole time. Haven’t been back that way yet. Sorry.”

“But you … thought about it.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying. Look, there was some kid in here earlier, but he ran out. Whether he dropped anything or not, I have no clue. What would I go looking for anyway?”

The man lowered his head and patted the counter.

Her uncle Chess stepped out of the storeroom, his eyes fixed on the clipboard in his hands. “Kelly darlin’, you can go ahead and …” He stopped and looked up at the two men.

“It’s okay, pops!” said the one who’d leaned on the counter. He straightened up and continued, “Y’all didn’t have what we were looking for. You have a nice day now, you hear?”

Chess nodded to them.

The two men slipped out the door.

Chess mumbled, “Suits me.” Then he said, “Listen, Kelly darlin’, you can go ahead and take your lunch break now. I’ll watch the register till you get back.”

Kelly Ann placed the two packs, wrote down her time, and picked up her purse. She stood near the door, pretending to be digging around in it for her keys while eyeing the car outside.

After the two men got in, a boy’s head popped up from the back seat. One of the men reached back and pushed him down.

Kelly Ann couldn’t be sure, but it looked like his mouth was covered with a piece of duct tape.

The car pulled off, and the store windows ceased being shook by the boom-ba-boomp-booomm.

She let go of the revolver’s handle and unclipped her car keys.

Sitting in her SUV with the AC running, she lit a cigarette and squinted back toward the highway. Her watch now read 11:54. She should’ve seen his cruiser by now. Kelly Ann had her cell phone out and was ready to call, when someone pulled up next to her and honked.

She grabbed her purse, got out and ran around to the driver’s side of the police cruiser.

“You’ll never guess what just happened,” Kelly Ann said, when her brother had gotten the window down.

He looked over at his partner then back at her. “Yeah? So, what happened?”

She opened her purse and said, “this kid came in and he …” Looking down into it, she saw how the paper towel had come loose, leaving the bills exposed. For an instant, it occurred to her that the paper towel would get lost among the purse’s other contents, becoming nothing more than a thing left down in there and not found for a month. But the money showing from it was … well, more money than she’d ever seen in her life. The bills were fanned out, too, reminding her of the amount she’d been counting out there on the edge of the sink.

Overlaying the sight of the exposed bills appeared an image of the kid in the car’s backseat.

“… he … he was … Oh, dear god!” The girl covered her mouth and looked out at the highway.

“What?” her brother said. “He tried to steal something?”

“No, he just …”

“Did you know him?”

“No,” Kelly Ann said. “I mean, I’d never seen him before. He was in and out so fast, he never even spoke a word … or did he?”

Her brother’s partner leaned forward. “Did he say something to you?”

Again, the image of the kid in the backseat of the deep purple car returned to her mind. He had been still wearing the hood, showing only the face — rather, just the eyes which had appeared not wide with fear but narrowed and blinking as if he’d just gotten up from a nap. It seemed as though he’d resigned himself to his fate, that there was no longer any use in fighting it.

Don’t mind me none! Kelly Ann remembered him saying.

“Well, hon’,” her brother said, “if it looked like he’d done nothing, you shouldn’t worry about it. He might’ve been after something and got scared. Sooner or later, he’s going to try it again and find out it’s easier than it looks. That’s when it gets harder to resist. Then, it never stops, until either he’s caught or someone puts him down. Either way, it’s out of your hands. Now, just you don’t go letting yourself try something like that, you hear me? It’d break Mama’s heart, if she were still with us.”

“What are you saying?” Kelly Ann responded, giggling. “Why I’d never … anyway, you two go on in. Uncle Chess can deal with you now. I’m going home to eat.”

Her brother's partner leaned forward again, this time with a grin. "You sure you won't join us?"

"Nope," she answered, "not right now I don't."

Her brother punched the other's shoulder.

Kelly Ann pulled out of Billieu and headed down highway 42. The glare off the pavement irritated her eyes, and she felt relieved once she'd turned onto Hennessy Road which had some shade trees for part of the way. Given no rainfall for weeks, dust from the road's gravel rose and trailed far back of the car. Half a mile later, Hennessy curved and entered Sunnybrook trailer park. Kelly Ann's was the one at the far end, next to an aluminum-paneled gate leading to an old cow pasture where people had been hauling and piling trash in one corner. She could see some smoke still rising from one end of the sprawling mass, where someone had dumped a bunch of dirty diapers and set fire to them.

With most of Sunnybrook's tenants either gone to work or hidden away from the summer heat, the park was quiet.

Kelly Ann got out and stared at the grayish column of smoke. She looked back down the graveled road to see if anyone was coming. Entering the open gate, she walked over to where bits and pieces of diapers formed a chalky tattered chain stretched along the edge of the grass. The smell was horrendous, making her already lose her appetite. Amid the blackened remains, some small flames were still visible, which made her glad, considering the reason she'd walked back that way. After emptying her purse of everything but the revolver and her wallet, she stepped back and watched the ashes of the consumed bills get mingled with the other charred debris.

"There goes my ticket to hell, I guess," Kelly Ann said. "Wonder where that kid'll end up. So sad. And those two, if they decide to

come back … Damn them! I've got to get out of this place."

Kelly Ann heard a crackling and a rumbling coming from behind a stand of pines on the other end of the pasture. Between their trunks and over beyond Billieu, the sky was black. Streaks of lightning shot out of the darkness. Her scalp tingled. She coughed. Pressed to her chest, her hand felt the label written with her name. She ripped this off, crumpled it and stepped forward to toss her uncle's handiwork into the smoldering mass on the ground. Wiping sweat and soot from her eyes, she wanted to return to the cool comfort of the trailer before the long-overdue rain hit.

As she was turning, Kelly Ann's eyes became fixed on a gap in the nearby wooded area, where stood a yellow and black sign marking the right-a-way for the Norco gas pipeline. But the sign wasn't what had caught her eyes.

A small boy in shorts was squatted next to the tree line. Realizing the woman had seen him, he jumped up and ran back down the clearing.

Caught between the pressure from the impending front, the stench from the whirling smoke, the oppressive heat off nearby trailer roofs and the swaying of tree tops overhead, Kelly Ann felt her head reeling and body being sucked into that wooded gap. What made her start running that way instead of back to the safety of her trailer, words wouldn't have covered.

The boy stopped, looked back at her, then took off again.

"Hey!" she shouted to him.

"I didn't do nuttin'! I didn't do nuttin'!"

"Wait! I want to talk to you!"

He slowed and stood, waiting. She kept coming, so he turned but then stumbled and fell.

Kelly Ann stumbled, too, dropping her purse. Shouldering it again, she stood up, panting, sweating. Following some heaving breaths, she blurted, "Why'd you run?"

"Why'd you come after me?" he replied. "I never took nuttin'."

"Huh?"

The boy stood up and brushed himself off. "I wasn't going to take anything anyways. I had money. What'd you come after me for?"

Kelly Ann squinted at him. "You … you were wearing that stupid hood. You looked so …"

"I gave it to that other fella, so you couldn't tell on me. Now,

they can't come after me, thinking they got me. I would've given it back, 'cept they ain't the forgivin' kind. Which is why I wanted to spend it before they did come. That way, they wouldn't know I had it, see?"

Kelly Ann looked past him down the clearing that went on and on through the woods. "Where do you live?"

"Me and my daddy, we got us a camp in the woods, back there." He was waving behind himself. "Real secluded. You stay in that trailer up there, don't you? I seen what you did back there. You better quit that store and go somewhere, 'fore they come looking for you. They ain't nice, 'specially with White girls like you."

"What do you mean?"

"See, they deal in dope. But they also deal with these rich dudes, selling off girls like you, or younger. That's why you need to get away from here. You're too pretty for that. Rather, you're pretty enough, they'd get their money back and then some."

Kelly Ann let her purse dangle from her hand. "Listen, my brother, he works for the state police. You should tell him what you just told me. He'll see to it they're put behind bars."

"Don't work that way. Listen, I gotta go. My daddy, he's sick and all. I was going to use some of that money to help him. Guess I better go back then. You go on back, too. Pack your things and get outta there."

He waved to her and stumbled a bit before passing through the tall grass, brushing the tops with his fingers.

Emerging later from the clearing, Kelly Ann stood in the pasture and stared up at the turbulent mass towering over the trailer park. The air temperature had dropped and the smoke from the rubbish all but dissipated.

"He said I was pretty. Stupid kid! And that guy with Brett needs

to get a life. I'm tired of being called pretty."

She felt the first drops and caught sight of the torrent sweeping her way.

"No sense in running now, is there? Just hold on, girl! You don't want to miss this one."

The Rogue Breeze

She should've known, she told herself later, looking back.

The afternoon air that first day had borne that same vague stillness it always did, especially whenever thick gray clouds were forming and filling up the sky. She could still see her husband, a stout farmer heading out to his tractor parked in the open field, looking up, and studying the threatening mass overhead. Something then had brought him to a standstill.

She could remember herself stooped over a loaded laundry basket she'd set down under a large oak beside the implement shed.

The farmer had looked back and called to his pregnant wife, saying how he thought he'd heard someone hollering from the woods across the field. He then said he was sure he'd heard it and needed to go over and take a look for whoever it was that might've needed help, before the weather set in.

The young woman she'd been then stood up and squinted at him, wondering what he had meant by "someone hollering." It should've registered with her then. Why hadn't it? His thick arms were already swinging and leather boots marching across the broad field littered with square bales of hay that were still in need of being taken to the barn. That bulky figure of a man kept getting smaller and smaller the further away he moved from her, till it seemed he'd almost merged with the trees and brush at the woods' edge. The young woman just shook her head and turned back with the bed sheet she'd pulled from the basket, preparing to drape it over the nearby clothes-line.

Within an instant, those eerily-shaped clouds above her then let loose a gush of air which descended and accosted the unwary wife, snatching one upper corner of the sheet from her hand. She gripped the other and held it firm till she could get the pin in place, then slid along the line and retrieved the absconded end, all the while cursing her sly attacker. To further its indulgences, the reckless breeze next took hold of the lower corners and yanked these away from her, as well, adding the extra touch of lifting the hem of her dress while playing with the loose strands of her long red hair. With hair shook loose from her freckled face and the wayward hem

subdued, the woman then wrestled with her spirited menace till she'd gotten the billowing sheet secured to the line.

"That devil of a wind has some nerve," she grumbled, "daring to come 'round and flirt with an expectant woman while her husband has gone trotting off somewhere. I swear!"

Shortly after dark, she again discovered her persistent suitor now toying with the curtains of an open window while seeking entry through her sewing room.

"Go on!" she told it. "Go on now!" she said, waving it away and slamming the window shut. "I'll have no more of that, you hear me?"

The ticking clock in the hallway showed the hour as getting past eight. She lifted the farmer's plate of food from the kitchen table and placed it in the refrigerator, still wondering if she should call someone—still wondered even later, if she should've. After standing for a while on the back steps in the light from the doorway and staring out into the windy darkness, she went upstairs, got undressed, and lay in bed listening for his footsteps. Nothing came to her ears except the sound of the big oak's branches being scraped against the tin roof of the shed.

Throughout the night, the breeze grew bolder with its enticements and sought to lull her to sleep with its sweet moaning around the corners of the house. When she finally did succumb, it filled her dreams with hundreds of bed sheets hung from a hundred clothes-lines, all flapping and wrapping themselves around her whenever she tried to turn and get away.

On that last day of a long week, the farmer's brother drove up. She came out to him on the front porch. He stood there, looking down at something in his hands and took a deep breath before saying her name.

“It was him alright,” he told her, lifting his head and staring straight into her eyes.

“Are they sure?” she asked.

“They said that fallen tree had him pinned down pretty deep in the mud back there,” he said. “But it was him. Wouldn’t have found him, if they hadn’t come back after that weather to finish their logging. That must’ve been what he heard that day, one of them hollering to another. It was when they started clearing the debris after that wind storm that they ….” He held out to her a stained leather wallet.

She opened it. A foggy layer of moisture coated the clear plastic over the license’s picture, but the impression of that wide bearded face of his could not be mistaken.

The brother assured her, “It was none they’d been cutting though, just some big ol’ dead pine that got blowed over by the weather, seems. So no one’s fault then.”

“No one?” she repeated. “No one, you say?”

“Just sheer accident, gal, that’s all,” he replied. “No one’s to blame, not even him. Now, if you’d gone and called that first night, he might’ve had a chance. But that don’t mean nothing now. For all we know, he was a goner the instant that thing landed on him.”

She closed the wallet and with her thumb rubbed away some of the caked dirt from its smooth leather surface, her mind starting to open up to the clever ways of that troublesome breeze which had come down that cloudy afternoon he’d gone over to the woods.

The brother turned away, pocketing his hands. “Well, I’d best be getting back. I’ve made the arrangements, so nothing more for you to do. As for the farm …”

“It’ll be mine now, won’t it?” she said.

“You sure about that?” He looked back at her and stared down at how much bigger she’d gotten since last time he’d seen her. “I mean, it’s a lot of work, even for a man. I could hire you someone, so you wouldn’t need to, you know, …”

“Don’t bother yourself on my account,” she replied. “I can manage on my own just fine. Have to. I know what all needs doing anyway.” She turned and reentered the house.

Leaning on a chair in the kitchen now, she huffed and sniffled and stared down at his wallet lying on the table top. The young farmer, even with a hefty mortgage and timber prices fluctuating the way they did, still managed somehow to pay for whatever they

needed. She had never even thought to ask.

Having wiped her eyes, she then picked up the wallet and headed out the back door. The day had been hot and still. In the shadow of the oak, she stared off across the broad field still full of those bales needing to be taken up, looking toward that line of trees into which he'd disappeared and from which her former careless heart would never again emerge to convict her.

The machinery of the loggers could be heard again, keeping up their ceaseless humming and buzzing further down in the woods.

She should've known, the thought grated her so. "That cursed breeze!" she muttered to herself—admonishing herself, more than anything. She then opened the wallet and took from it his credit card.

Taking his pickup into town, she made a stop at the beauty shop before heading over to the hardware store. By late afternoon, she'd returned and was backing up to the house's back door step. A large cardboard box sat in the truck's bed. After managing to slide it across the kitchen floor and into the utility room, she measured by sight the open spot next to the washer and, running a hand over the bobbed ends of her hair, reckoned there room enough for the dryer she felt lucky enough to have found on sale.

By late afternoon, the machinery in the woods had gone silent. Wearing a new pair of overalls, a ball cap, and a pair of leather gloves, she headed out into the field and boarded the tractor left parked with a long trailer attached. While she worked, thin clouds appeared in the sky and drifted westward, dowsed with the last light of the lowering sun. She was certain that, once the sun had disappeared beyond the woods and the first stars showed through the clouds, the same unrelenting breeze would make its way down and come stirring around among the bales left on the ground—only this time she'd made sure to leave nothing of herself to catch hold of.

With a third of the lot having been loaded and stacked, she stood beside the trailer, wiping sweat from her cheeks and arching her stiffened back. While she gazed up into the deepening air above, a hand rested on the bulging front of her overalls.

"Come on!" she called to the cowardly breeze. "Come on then! Hiding out up there, thinking you could sneak down and take advantage again of a silly woman's heart. Come on then, make yourself useful for once by cooling me down at least, till I can get

the last of these bales put away."

Peninsula
a novella

The Arrival

When I found her at the bottom of the stairs, her eyes were open but she wasn't breathing. She'd obviously crawled all the way to the house and collapsed before even making it up the first of twenty steps to my front door.

A week earlier, if I'd come back home and found a dead Black woman on the peninsula, I'd have called 911, naturally. There was no need for doing that in this case.

Because here she was, and I recognized her for who she was. Rather, I had known a few things about her for a while, though only once before having actually met her. She had finally learned where I lived, or perhaps knew it all along. No surprises there, given that she had always seemed to know so much more about me than I knew about her. What I couldn't understand was, why now? Why had she waited this long?

I lifted her upper torso from the pavement and brushed away some sand clinging to her chin and forehead. Her clothes and hair were drenched and dripping. Her skin was cold, stiff, and the white t-shirt showed a big dark spot under the left breast. I'd never gotten this close to her face before, and only now noticed a clear membrane stretched over the fine curvatures of its surface. I guessed this to be part of what gave her body its resilience against all those life-threatening accidents she'd had to endure. Thus, I knew this time it wouldn't be long — her coming to, that is — which was why I kept holding her, waiting. I had to see the transition for myself.

Her eyes slowly shut on their own, and the skin of her arms softened and turned supple. Then, she coughed, spat up some water and took in a gasp of air. Her hand gripped my arm as she leaned into my chest. After she'd opened her eyes again and looked up at me, the lips widened into a smile of recognition.

“Hey, wow!” she said, her voice still a bit hoarse. “I feel like I’m in a movie with you. Is this what it’s like?” She coughed some more.

I said, “The first take, yeah.”

“So, what happens next? A kissing scene? You don’t want to kiss me, not right now.”

“I would, but you’re right. I need to get you upstairs. Think you can make it?”

About halfway up, I didn’t have to hold onto her anymore. She just trotted on up and waited for me.

“I get to see how you live now,” she said with a grin.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” I told her, huffing a bit from the climb. It felt harder than usual getting back up there. “It’s not much, except for maybe the view.”

“Oh, I want to see it,” she said, bright and cheery-like.

I had to admit my thrill and relief, not so much at finding her after all this time, definitely not as lying limp and lifeless near my doorstep, but getting to see her wake up as if nothing had happened. It still amazed me, how she was able to do that. I supposed it would’ve astounded anyone, seeing a person who had obviously been dead a moment ago suddenly come back to life — and not just a one time deal, but again and again.

I’d reached the top landing and was getting the door unlocked. “You sure you don’t want to lie down first? I could get a towel.”

“I’m fine now. This is such a nice place you have …. Oh, the inside’s even nicer.”

We entered the living area which opened up onto the kitchen. Beyond, there was a glass sliding door to the deck. Outside, she leaned on the railing and looked all around. The morning sky had reached that pale blue stage, with some clouds adorned in a pinkish flush from the dawning light. Up high on the deck like this, one could feel the breeze coming up off the lake waters quite well. It played with the shaggy locks of her thick wet curls, while the deep mirror of her face captured the sun’s brilliance breaking over the horizon.

“Since it’s getting light,” I suggested, “guess you’ll be wanting to go home soon.”

“Not yet,” she replied. “There’s something we really need to talk about, before things get too far gone.”

I looked out over the water. Early morning traffic on the distant

causeway showed countless headlights. They were streaming back and forth against the western edge of the sky, over the white pylons poking up like matchsticks out of the water.

"How far gone are we talking here?" I asked her.

"You have to know. I'm not the person you think I am. Not anymore."

The Ticket

Despite her warning, nothing seemed any different about her from before — though it had been several days since I'd last seen the woman.

Six days prior, actually, I'd gone to the supermarket north of the causeway approach as it left Mandeville. As soon as I'd entered and grabbed a cart, I came upon a young Black woman blocking the breeze-way, leaning over an empty buggy. In response to my polite "excuse me", she'd backed up the cart, with eyes blinking and mouth hanging open. I just chalked up the expression as an exaggerated "excuse me?" in response.

Things picked up later after I'd gone down a few aisles with my checklist, then parked my half-filled buggy in the produce section to thumb through the remainder of my coupons, unaware the same woman from before was now standing nearby squeezing a melon and scrutinizing my face. I just kept my eyes on what I was doing, since for all I knew she could've been stalking me the whole time, perhaps seeking an apology for my perceived rudeness.

She was small, gently figured, hardly half my age. I could've said cute, but that would've sounded trite. Me, on the other hand? Back in my forties, they'd said I had that rugged look. Now over sixty, sinewy yet gaunt, graying, slightly hunched, there was not much left of my former attraction with women. I probably couldn't have kept up with this inquisitive one, even if I took supplements. I wanted to say something trivial like how her high cheeks reminded me of coffee with just a dab of milk, while deep auburn curls hung like moss over smooth shoulders. But coming from a White man that might've gotten me labeled either a racist or a pervert — at least, with the crowd I used to run with. By "used to", I meant back when I had a name and a face which partly got movie-goers through the door, the greater portion already going there because of

a bigger name. I was a character actor back then, taking supporting roles at best. I partied with the rest, liberals all of them. I had my days in the sun, but those were over now. Had been for some years. But back to the woman, if that was indeed what she was. For I'd known no other woman better able at turning my quiet world inside out like this one was destined to do from that day forward.

"You're Bedford Lewis, aren't you?" she asked me.

"Hm?" I turned my head, eyeing her over my glasses. "Well, used to be. Now, I'm just … plain old Bedford Lewis."

"Wow! Like, it's really you. I can't believe this. I mean, it's not like I couldn't tell, you seeming, you know … a little older and shorter than I'd pictured you. Oh, but I didn't mean …"

"That's perfecting fine. I hate to admit it myself, but I'm what you would call a veteran actor now. No insult taken."

As I said, I was sorting coupons for my weekly trips to the grocery. Yes, it'd come to that, an aged actor having to scrimp and scrape for every Jefferson nickel he could get hold of. Sadly, the investments I'd made from one hit movie after another hadn't been doing so well lately. A fellow's got to do what he's got to do, lah-dee-dah, lah-dee-freakin'-dah and all that.

That sparkle in her eyes told me she must've been already entertaining certain delusions. I didn't mean to have to burst her bubble.

"So, you must be living the good life by now," she continued, "retirement and all, that is. I mean, you must've made a ton of money. And yet you're … using coupons?"

"Retirement hasn't been as good to me as to some in the business. But I manage." I removed my spectacles and leaned on the cart. "How about you? What do you do to pay the rent?"

"Me? Well … There! See?"

She was pointing toward the upper wall over the deli. Specifically, what had been portrayed across its face — various food items given faces and hands and feet, dancing the bunny hop.

"That's me," she said with a big grin. "Just a little thing though. Nothing like I'm really capable of. If you're ever over at that meat market down on Florida, take a look at the side wall. There are others. You'll know my work by my signature, N-apostrophe-T-C." She made the characters with her finger in the air.

"Apostrophe?"

"Oh, I didn't introduce myself. Sorry. Ne'Tasha Chavers." She

extended her hand. “The apostrophe’s between the ‘Ne’ and ‘Tasha’. That’s my name. Ne’Tasha.”

It was not a regular shake she gave me. She took my fingers and curled them over with hers in an interlocking fashion.

“You’re hands are so warm,” she then said. “Bet you’ve got plenty of women knocking at your door. Huh?” She laughed, eyes squinting and blinking.

Did I mention cute?

“Just one,” I replied. “We’re divorced now. The rumors about actors bedding lots of women are greatly exaggerated.”

“That’s hard to believe. You seem so virile. Go get you another. Stop being so lonely. But, hey, make sure she’s rich, now. Then, you can throw away all those old coupons. Am I right?” With a side-long glance, she winked at me.

I just smiled and nodded … and sighed at the prospect that I’d already lost my touch with this one, at least.

“Hey, I’ve got to get going,” she said, glancing behind her. “It’s been so great meeting a movie star. I’m so blessed. You don’t do autographs, do you? Oops! I don’t have anything to write on.”

I felt my pockets. “And I don’t have anything to write with. Tell you what …” I pulled out my wallet, as thin as it was, and dug around for a receipt I’d signed but forgotten to turn back in. “Here. How about that?”

“Oh!” She snatched it and looked hard at it. “This is so cool. Thank you. I’ll treasure it. I really will.”

“Well, if I never see you again, have a wonderful life, Ne’Tasha.” Had no one ever taught me, never say never?

“Oh, he said my name. I’m so honored. But hey, don’t let anybody ever tell you you’re a has-been. OK? You may not be there yet, but I’m sure it’s on the way, I just know it.”

I figured by “on the way” she meant I could get it back. I said to myself, “not in this life-time.” But she must’ve read my mind.

“Just don’t fret about it,” she continued. “May not be now, but they’ll be talking about you for years to come.” She then turned around her still empty cart. “That’s the best kind of talk there is, you know. It’s sweeter that way. Like I always say, …”

“… there’s joy in the potential?” I muttered to myself after she’d gone. Rather, what she’d actually said to me with those parting words: “The greatest joy lies in the potential,” this before disappearing among the crowd of people.

What could've been, but remained so far out of sight. Still, I couldn't yet fathom the brilliance of the concept. I was too wrapped up in the now, the quicky, the "I should've gotten her number" kind of backwards thinking. I thought she'd meant something like dreaming about it, which I did a lot of for no telling how many hours of the nights afterward — dreaming about her, and sometimes throughout the afternoon when I'd let my thinking drift with the clouds. It was like, when our fingers curled over each other, she'd dug into my soul and made her nest there.

The Essence

Now, if at the start there seemed a question of lack of shock at finding this young woman lying dead at my doorstep, it should be just as fair to say that there had never been any live ones found there, either. Retirement had provided me the best cover for spurning the dating scene, since it allowed a man to be deemed elderly without letting on that he was in no way impotent. Thus, I could limit my acquaintances among actual women to just my ex-wife Lizzy and our daughter Jenny. And neither ever made an appearance except by phone. So honestly, Ne'Tasha's arrival days later than expected, no matter her condition, disturbed me far less than it would have had she followed me back from the store that previous Monday.

And since it had been that previous Monday when I'd first met her, I should mention that my cart then held nothing but canned goods — just as Wednesdays were reserved for cold items, if need be, and a visit to the local meat market on Fridays offered cheaper pricing and better cuts. Thus, fewer bags meant fewer trips up the stairs to the front door. The house stood on 12-foot piers, so it was always a tough climb. Still was, especially for a guy who didn't exercise that much. Rather, not at all. But it was what I had to live with, being this close to the water where storm surges could get up to eight feet. It must've taken me three years here, before I realized what the small boat attached to the outside wall was for.

Believe me, twenty steps was more than enough exercise for a man of 63. Out in Los Angeles, I'd lived in second-floor apartments during my hungry years, when skipping steps was all part of the fast-paced lifestyle of a young actor starting out. I'd get off work,

rush to shower and dress then head over to an audition or an improv class. Later, when I'd secured a name with that first big hit, I could afford to slow down and wait for the calls. Now, out here — or over here on the north-shore of Lake Pontchartrain, rather — I would be surprised if I got any, which was why I didn't rush that day to get the door open at the sound of the phone inside.

The ringer had stopped and the machine picked up before I let the bags land on the kitchen counter. Sorting through the items by label, I listened for the voice of the caller. 50-ish, female, tired sounding. I knew her in an instant, so no rush to call Lizzy back. Why she didn't ring my cell phone has to be explained. It had to do with a certain groundless fear of feeding my brain too much electromagnetic radiation. She was into the health-kick now. Supplements, homeopathy, essential oils, that kind of thing. It was clear I was in no need to return the favor. If I really wanted to tell her what was on my mind, I told it to the walls. Walls were good listeners, the best. Afterwards, it always seemed to make me feel a lot better. But then, the reality of it set in and made me realize how much breath I'd wasted.

That night, lying sleepless in bed, I fantasized about Ne'Tasha. Her openness and charm made me want to treat her to dinner, watch the sunset together from the deck, and after a few glasses of wine …

After standing over the toilet for several minutes, I felt the same as when I'd talked to the walls — felt good to get it out, but what a complete waste. Even worse, I had to make another trip in the morning, it'd gotten me so worked up again. I hadn't felt this energized since I'd first dated Lizzy. After our daughter was born, the flame had started to flicker, and any thought of trying to renew it by having an affair simply depressed me. But look at what it was doing to me now? How had this girl Ne'Tasha gotten so deep under my skin, with just that brief encounter and contact in a grocery store? Or should I have called it another coulda-woulda-shoulda and left it at that? Perhaps I should've just listened to her when she'd said, "go get you another. Stop being so lonely." But was there any other woman who could've done it so exquisitely as she had? That would've been two miracles in one week.

That Tuesday was laundry day. The washeteria was up and over two blocks, so no need to have gotten a set of machines for the house. I took a book and a couple of magazines. There were two women, one about my age but thicker, the other with a hyper-brat. A young guy came in, felt his clothes in a drier, stuck some coins in and left with another guy, laughing.

I got home, folded things and did some fishing from the pier for dinner. A flock of gulls started coming in within minutes of my casting, feeding on small fish from the water's surface and mollusks along the shoreline.

The pier extended just beyond the house, 10 feet wide and protruding out over the water about 100 feet. The piles stuck up a couple of feet above the deck boards, with safety rails stretched between. Several weekenders might occasionally be found out there, casting their lures, as well. I made no fuss about that. They always cleaned up after themselves before leaving, none lingering past sundown. Once, a couple drove out, the husband a photographer, and asked if it would be alright to get just some shots of the sunset over Lake Pontchartrain, including the silhouette of the old church on a nearby promontory. They remained for no more than half an hour then left, before I'd had a chance to offer them a drink. And other than the annoyance of having one salesperson and two Mormon guys on bicycles show up, each time politely but firmly shooed away, I couldn't recall anyone else ever wanting to come out that far, not since moving from California and buying the place.

As for the gulls, they proved a nuisance for no one but me. They hardly ever came around when anybody else was out fishing from the pier. Why they showed up in droves whenever I went out left me clueless. I surmised that they somehow knew I'd come from California, like there might be some sort of rivalry to match that of the Saints and the 49ers. Who knew?

Despite the gulls, I happened to snag two small catfish and fried these up with garlic and butter. Later and until about 5:00, I stayed in the room I called my workshop, listening to music and working on a toaster. This was what I did for a few extra bucks, fixed things for some of the elderly people in town. As for the music, a friend had turned me on to classical about ten years earlier, before I'd left the west coast and headed back east. I had Bach's *Magnificat* on the CD player.

It was around the same time that the phone rang again. Wow, two times in one week! She must've been on a roll, having read something else about green tea or ginseng or whatever might help keep my prostate from crimping up. But not her this time. Young, female, vibrant attitude. Erica Desmond. Hadn't heard the voice of my former publicist in, what, two years?

She said over the machine she was in New Orleans and wanted to touch base and see how I was enjoying retirement, give her a call and all that. It told me that business for her was slow, as well.

Feeling exhilarated at finally getting the toaster's timer working again midst the triumphal sounds of the chorus and orchestra's "*Gloria Patri*", I started thinking about Erica. Young, vibrant, nicely built Erica. I mean, I had to do something productive with this suddenly burgeoning supply of testosterone. So, I called her back, asked if she'd like to have dinner on the north-shore, come back to my place for a nightcap, then maybe we'd … but hold onto the "maybe" part, until I had navigated the preliminaries first.

A strange giddiness came over me when she actually agreed.

Half of me with calm words was uttering, "Simmer down, old boy! Let's see where this goes first," while the other kept yelling, "Go for it, stud!" I wasn't prepared for the let-down those two jokers had in store for me.

The Siren

I told Erica that all she needed to do was, once she'd crossed the lake on the causeway, take the first exit then the right turn onto Florida Street. Go a few blocks then look for Cafe Joe's on the right. I said I'd meet her there around 8:00 the following night.

I made my Wednesday run to the store, grabbing up things like milk, butter, eggs, bread, that kind of thing. I then went to work on

a little project for an elderly gentleman who had a place right on the lake front. He had handed me an old favorite book of his, the cover of which--so worn and darkened with age, that I had to guess the color as having once been a deep rich green—had become detached, with several pages separated from the spine. I did a net-search, looking for any articles or videos which explained book binding and repair. After securing some of the materials at a craft store and laying out the tools, I got to work midst the opening strains of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. Leaving the glue to dry on some of the pieces, I then headed for the shower.

Joe's was within my budget, of course, even for two to eat. It had been about a year since I'd driven after dark, and things seemed a bit confusing. But I made it. Erica walked in about 10 minutes after I did. We ordered, caught up, then I proposed she follow me back to the peninsula. She seemed more eager than I'd expected. To add flavoring to my suggestion she stay the night, I offered a gorgeous sunrise with a delicious breakfast of eggs and bacon. Her enthusiasm about spending the extra time together made me wonder if what Ne'Tasha had been saying was really spot-on, that it was "on the way" and I needed only to wait for it.

Once we were in the house, Erica plopped herself onto the sofa and said, "Woo! Man, I'm stuffed. What've you got to drink?"

No wine, but scotch seemed good enough. Handing her a glass, I sat down and placed an arm over the back cushion, just behind her head. Following a clink of the glasses, she hopped up and walked through the kitchen area. Shoving the glass door open, she went straight to the railing on the deck and leaned there. I strolled out and sat against the railing myself, smiling at her.

"That is something," she said. "Must be non-stop all night long." I looked over my shoulder. Obviously, she'd meant the traffic on the causeway. I turned and leaned beside her.

"Sun comes up over there," I said, gesturing to my left.

"You know, L.A. traffic is non-stop, too, but with hardly any space either way to breathe. Out here, everything's so open and … empty, like an ocean. That's the Gulf, right?"

"No, Lake Pontchartrain. The Gulf is further south of New Orleans."

"But it's so big and dark and … anybody ever drown out there, that you know of?"

"Not since I moved here. Actually, there's an old church over to

your right with a bell which used to sound for boats on the lake, like a lifeguard. But no accidents as far as I recall."

Erica looked that way and said, "Hm, is that so?" She stepped away, stretching her arms as she went. I figured she was already getting bored. I felt I needed to act soon.

"Want to go inside?" I suggested. "I could put some music on."

Erica spun around, throwing me a not-so-very romantic smile under sparkling eyes. "Bedford, what would you say, if I arranged a televised interview with you and Dick McCoy?"

"Dick McCoy? How did you …?"

"And we could do some publicity photos. I've got a new photographer working for me now. I want to keep it local, so I'll have him scout out the area. And get this! I've managed to rack up some connections that might could land you a walk-on in the next blockbuster."

"Wait, hold the phone. You're trying to lure me back?"

She sipped from her glass and smacked her lips. "You know, I could feel it the second I sat down in that little bistro. You're hungry again. It's calling to you, Bedford. Heed it. You're a gem in obscurity. Time to get out there and shine for the world once more. Now, I'm not forcing you, don't get me wrong. Just sleep on it, OK babe? Oh, and thanks for the drink."

"But, what about …?"

She left the glass on the railing and headed for the door. "I'll call you in the morning with a schedule. We can make this work. Trust me." On the way out, she was dancing, snapping her fingers and singing, "I've got … more time to make it, I've got … more heart to take it, lah dee dah dah … Yeah!" And there went the door, followed by feet scurrying down the steps.

It was all coming back to me then. I should've remembered. Nothing turned on Erica Desmond like work, and work was the only thing that would satisfy her insatiable hunger for more work. She was a living, breathing perpetual-motion machine. I used to wonder why guys kept going in and out of her life like through a revolving door. It all came back to me now. And I was a sucker to believe I could tame her.

I remembered telling Ne'Tasha how all that talk about actors bedding lots of women was a joke. I never realized before how funny a joke it truly made. It kept me laughing so till, having emptied the two glasses in the sink, I phoned an old actor buddy

and told him how I'd just gotten the punch-line. He laughed, too, agreed with my assessment of Erica — another client of hers having made the same mistake — then got scolded by his third wife sitting next to him in bed reading a book.

I thought again about Ne'Tasha and remembered her asking for my autograph. In my younger days, the pretty ones usually asked me to sign some piece of clothing. One even wanted me to sign her bra. We ducked somewhere private where she raised her t-shirt and pointed to the exact spot. I said I hoped her boyfriend wouldn't come looking for me later. She laughed and said, "Oh, she's a fan of yours, too." It was the odd quirky things like that that stirred in me a craving for more.

It was becoming more and more frustrating that, whenever my mind strayed back to Ne'Tasha, it would keep slipping and sliding into that sexual groove. It was starting to piss me off that I might wind up the dirty old man in a wheelchair who chased the pretty young nurses around. However, I was sure these feelings for the young street artist went way beyond that. I'd never had a woman do this to me before. After lying awake in bed for a while, I got tired of fighting the urge to return to the toilet and went out onto the deck.

Listening to the surf while watching that stream of headlights along the horizon, I heard a jet flying low, headed for the invisible airport just across the lake. Its running lights flashed against the starry expanse. The universe seemed so much bigger to me now, yet so much closer. Was Ne'Tasha out there, too, a star among stars? Or could she have been the whole galaxy itself? One minute I wanted to run down the pier and dive into those dark waters. The next, I wished I could sprout wings and fly to Neptune. Some fool would've insisted, "Bedford, you're just in love." But could love make one want to run out onto a highway and stop a mac-truck?

The Enigma

The next morning, I woke up with a pounding headache and some sore joints. I wasn't running a temperature, but it felt like the flu. I couldn't have gotten it from Erica, since my plan for snatching some intimate touch-time never even made it to first base. Maybe the night air, or all those weird thoughts about Ne'Tasha. Who knew? I

still felt awful.

Erica had tried calling around 7:00, then again at 7:30 and for every half hour afterwards until 9:30 when I finally dragged myself out of bed and onto the sofa.

“Yeah, what’s up,” I groaned into the receiver.

“Great news, Bedford!” came that sickly cheery voice of hers. “Dick McCoy is flying into New Orleans tomorrow for a broadcasters convention. I talked him into opening a half-hour window for you at the Hyatt Regency. You need to be there by nine at the earliest. Tell me you can make it.”

“Who? Oh, yeah. Man, my head hurts. Yeah, sure, guess I could, but …”

“Great! I’ll meet you in the lobby and lead you from there. Need I say, dress appropriately?”

“Yeah, right. Whatever.”

“We’re on our way, babe. Just don’t fall down those stairs, OK? Be sweet. Bye.”

By late morning, the pain in my frontal lobe had subsided, and I felt I could walk without tumbling over furniture. While I was preparing to down some lunch before delivering Missus Ruben’s repaired toaster, there came a loud knock at the door. Two Mandeville city cops stood on the landing at the top of the stairs.

“Morning, sir,” one said. “I’m Officer Barrilleaux, this is Officer Jakes. Sorry to disturb you, but we’re looking for Mister Bedford Lewis. Are you him?”

“Yeah, can I help you?”

“Sir, we’re investigating an accident involving a young woman. We found this on her person. Is that your signature?” Barrilleaux held out a slip of paper which did bear my scrawl of a name. “We’re just trying to verify if you knew the deceased.”

“Deceased?” I asked. “You mean she’s dead?”

“Yes, sir. It was a hit-and-run. We’re still trying to track down the driver. If you don’t mind, can you tell us where your were last night around 9:00.”

“Well, I was here, until I went to bed around ten or so.”

“Do you have anyone who could confirm that?”

“Sorry, I live alone. A friend of mine left here a little before nine, though. That’s about all I can say.”

“Well, we’d like you to come with us to Covington Trace where they’re holding the body. Just to see if you can ID the woman. We’d

really appreciate your cooperation."

Now, I had nothing but the utmost respect for the police. They were the ones who kept the bad guys from causing problems for the rest of us, after all. But I'd only had direct dealings with them for a few traffic citations, and believe me it could get kind of scary. It was just a little odd feeling I got, whenever I'd been pulled over. Like, one false move and I could end up in cuffs and be hauled off to jail. An unreasonable fear, if there ever was one. Still, in this case, I knew without a doubt I was innocent. So, I figured it couldn't hurt to go along.

They had me ride in the back, with that cage between them and me. I'd given back the paper with my signature, but wanted to be certain of something.

"Excuse me, could I have another look at that receipt?"

The officer in the passenger side, Jakes, pulled it from his clipboard and held it against the grating. Sure enough, it was the same one I'd given Ne'Tasha.

"Do you mind my asking her name?" I asked him.

"Unfortunately, there was no ID on the woman's body," Jakes replied. "That's where we thought you might be able to help us. The hospital is keeping it in their temporary storage unit until the coroner can arrive to pick it up for examination."

I began to feel queasy about the whole thing. If it was her, I would feel really bad about having thought of her the way I'd been thinking. Still, I had to show a little compassion for Ne'Tasha, just because she seemed the sort of person who deserved it.

At the hospital, we were led to a room down a back hallway, and were met there by the parish coroner who'd just arrived.

"I'm Doctor Stevens," said the man. "You have a cadaver for me?"

We had to wait for a nurse to unlock the door. She entered the room first and looked around. It felt like a refrigerator in there. The smell nearly knocked me back into my headache. There was just one gurney with a cloth draped over it. The nurse lifted the cloth like there might be something under it. But not even air. She looked around again, then shrugged.

"Ma'am," said Barrilleaux, "we brought in a Jane Doe last night. Is it possible someone already claimed the body?"

"I'd have to check with the main desk," the nurse said. "Hold on." She went back down the hall for a few minutes then returned.

“There’s no record of anyone claiming your Jane Doe. As far as I know, no one had authorized her removal.”

“You mean, there’s no cadaver?” asked the coroner.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” she replied.

“Well,” he said, looking kind of annoyed, “I have another pick-up in Madisonville. When you find her, call me.”

The nurse locked the door, and we returned to the front desk.

“We brought in a Jane Doe last night,” Jakes queried the receptionist. “She was the only one. Is there any record of someone claiming the body?”

This woman made a phone call, too. It was becoming obvious to me, if to no one else, that Ne’Tasha was nowhere to be found. After more checking with more question marks left than exclamation points, the officers took my number and agreed to take me home. They said I might be called back, if anything turned up — like maybe Ne’Tasha herself might chance showing back up and saying, “Hey, it’s me again. Jane Doe?” Of course, that was just me trying to find humor in the thing. Again, I felt bad about the whole matter. She was a sweet girl who had gotten so deep under my skin, I couldn’t help wondering what sort of person I’d missed really befriending.

After getting home then finally getting to deliver Missus Ruben’s toaster — for which she was most grateful as far as a $20.00 bill could say it — I stopped at a convenience store to grab a few items like laundry detergent, toothpaste, shampoo, that kind of thing. The store front was about as plain as they come, with the exception of several wavy and curly colored ribbons painted near the left corner. These seemed out of balance and kind of begging for some sort of “what’s the rest of the story?” inquiry. So, I walked around the corner and found the rest of the story: they were the long flowing locks of hair from the head of a dark-skinned woman shining a flashlight onto her face. Sure enough, stenciled at the bottom, “N’TC”, Ne’Tasha’s signature.

I asked the cashier at check-out, but got nothing but a shrug. No telling how many other works she’d left around town. I captured this one with my phone, and planned to catalog as many as I could before the week was out.

I went back and snapped the one over the Market’s grocery deli, then found the mural she’d mentioned on the meat market’s side wall on Florida: it depicted cows standing on their hind-legs,

leaning back in various postures and smoking cigarettes. The idea began circulating in my brain of creating a page on some social media site as a kind of memorial.

I was back at my car, when I spotted a woman walking, limping slightly rather, along the opposite side of the roadway, wearing lime green hospital scrubs. That in itself seemed peculiar, unless she'd come from a nearby doctor's office. And it was a young Black woman with curly hair not unlike Ne'Tasha's, and with about the same build. She turned into the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant, so I let it go, figuring she was getting something to eat. Thoughts of the girl from the produce aisle were revived, how vibrant and personable she'd been. The woman continued through the lot and around the back of the building. I was tempted to drive down the side street and see if I could catch sight of her face.

My phone then sounded. It was my daughter Jenny. "Hey, baby."

"Dad, I love you, I love you with all my heart, but could you spare me some money by chance?"

"What about your…"

"Mom's not talking to me right now. I really need your help. Can you, please, please?"

"Well, I…"

"Thank you, thank you, with all my heart. Love you. Bye."

My investigating the woman would thus have to wait. I called my broker to have him wire a few hundred to my daughter. I also had to ask him the balance, considering some bills coming due the following week. That bit part Erica had spoken of, in whatever project she'd gotten her hands on, was proving the greater temptation dollar-wise over settling the matter of the mystery woman.

Now, I was sure I wasn't thinking crazy or nothing, but it was grating on my mind what might have happened to Ne'Tasha. It was getting harder now than before of letting her exit my life so quickly. My rational mind would coo, "Is it really that hard?" while something deeper kept screeching, "Don't!" Believe me, having worked in the factory of dreams, I had an intimate knowledge of what it meant to keep a careful separation between the on and off-screen worlds. I just couldn't find a comparable and convincing way of separating souls intertwined.

After getting back and unloading things, I walked out to the pier

and down it a ways. Water lashed against the pilings. It got deeper as I went out. The gulls started coming in, as usual. I walked back, then had the urge to walk down it again. I tried yelling at the gulls, but to no avail. I just didn't know what to do with myself, like I was waiting for the cops to show back up and say they'd found her and that'd be that. Why the mystery? Why was it so hard to admit she was dead?

Out on the pier, it was easy to get the notion that you were surrounded by all that water, detached from the mainland, with nowhere to go. But as with the peninsula, all you had to do was turn around and there was the way back. You were not as detached as you'd imagined. There was always that day-to-day reality to return to, where Ne'Tasha's death and disappearance had done nothing to stop this old world from going along its mindless, ever insatiable way.

The Message

I knew this much: no one had better ever call me at 2:00 in the morning. The phone had been ringing and was still ringing when I finally got awake enough to realize that it was really ringing. After stumbling in the dark while getting there, I picked up. There was an instant of silence before it switched over to the dial-tone. A pause, as if whoever had had the nerve to call that late thought differently about it only after they'd heard me growl, "Yeah, what?"

Need I say that I didn't get much sleep afterwards? Thus, the warning. I laid back down, wondered why I'd gone to the hospital the day before, then remembered. Ne'Tasha. For some crazy reason, it made me feel like tearing up. But I stopped that quick, got up and drank some milk. In my mind, I looked at the name and got caught up on its unobtrusive apostrophe. An apostrophe usually meant something missing from a word, something left out which one either knew about or had to guess at. I got my phone and did a net-search and found that there were not a few females with the same spelling actually, though no hint as to what was being concealed.

I must've dozed off and slept for at least an hour or so before my cell phone sounded. Erica. 7:16. The sun had broke through the window blinds already and was hitting me in the eyes.

"Hey, what's up?" I said, squinting hard.

“Hyatt Regency, nine o’clock. You ready yet?”

I wiped the glare and its sting from my eyes. “I’ve still got to shower and get dressed first.”

“Aw, man! Get something to power yourself up with, too. You need to be sharp.”

“I’ll grab a coffee on the way out.”

“Caffeine’s just a stimulant. Try something that’ll pump you with some energy.”

“I’ll see what I can find. By the way, been wondering what this little favor’s going to cost me.”

“We’ll discuss that later. For now, I need you there bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“Great, I’m your pet poodle now. Anything else I need to know up-front?”

“Look your best and don’t be nervous. Oh, I’ve got another call. Remember, nine o’clock, Hyatt Regency.”

It’d been so long since my last visit to New Orleans, I’d forgotten about how terrible the traffic was that time of the morning. I tried calling her to say it would be more like 9:30, but got no answer. Coming off the interstate from the causeway, I scooted over for the turn onto Tulane which was already backed up. Having checked the route beforehand, I knew I could turn right on Lasalle and be in front of the Hyatt in a matter of minutes.

Looking my best without being nervous was out of the question. Back in the old days, it was nothing for one of Dick McCoy’s guests to light up a cigar during an interview. Entering the hotel lobby, I almost ran into that 6-foot tall sign bearing the no-symbol over a smoking butt. I hoped there would at least be some time for a few deep labored breaths.

“Bedford!” I heard from somewhere beyond the main staircase. Erica was sitting near the windows with a young Black guy, signaling for me to come to them.

“Sorry,” I tried. “Traffic, you know.”

“Bedford, this is Quintin Chavers. Quintin, Bedford Lewis.”

The young guy stood up grinning and took my hand. I thought *I* was nervous. He giggled more than spoke.

“Don’t let him fool you, Bedford,” Erica said. “You’ve got to hear him play. But not now. Let’s go find Dick, if he hasn’t left yet.”

It turned out he hadn’t, and he seemed more than pleased to see me. As always, it felt good to be recognized, though nowhere as

genuine as it'd been with someone like Ne'Tasha. Just standard industry etiquette. I did my best to follow course and make a decent impression — not unlike a job interview or audition, where you act like you can be whatever they're looking for and try to deliver accordingly, and where having a name is like flashing a gold card at a fancy restaurant. Sadly, I couldn't say the same for the young guy Quintin. I felt for the kid, but knew he had to learn somehow, just like I and a few thousand others had, and that on a daily basis. I would leave the coaching to Erica though, having no idea what he could do. Trusting her, it had to be good, that was certain.

The set was in a suite up on the tenth floor: two chairs, two cameras and Dick McCoy's logo on an easel near one wall. There was a large plate-glass window giving a bird's view of the city's downtown, including the Superdome.

With a cue from the cameraman, McCoy started his intro. "Welcome everybody. Great to have you with us. With me today is veteran actor Bedford Lewis whom you may best remember as the co-pilot from the docudrama Skyliner. He also did guest appearances on the daytime TV series Bretton Heights, was married to actress Elisabeth Newman, and there's his lovely daughter Jennifer Lewis who happens to be lead singer for the band Starfly. A talented family all around. Welcome Bedford."

"Thanks, Dick. Happy to be here."

"I understand you live here locally now. Am I correct?"

"Across the lake on what they call the north-shore."

"And you left Los Angeles how long ago?"

"Been close to five years."

"Any plans to return to acting?"

"Well, I …"

It was at this point that something got my attention through the window, since they'd seated me facing that direction. Across the way, someone had appeared over the Superdome's upper rim and was repelling off it by rope. They were wearing a utility harness with some items hanging from the belt. I continued talking while observing the lone figure who was getting ready to do no telling what, dangling there several feet down.

"… I've done a little dinner theater, but I feel most at home in front of the camera."

"So, any movie roles we should look forward to?"

I glanced over at Erica. She had her arms crossed and appeared

distracted by the door for some reason. I then said, “There may be something in the not too distant future. I’m working with some people …”

The figure hanging off the dome by a rope had un-clipped one of the items from the belt, a sprayer of some sort. It seemed odd that a worker would be doing cleaning duty with just a rope, rather than scaffolding. Actually, the item appeared to be a portable paint sprayer, which got me to thinking they might be performing some kind of stunt. They started by painting a large jagged circular area in white. Then, taking another sprayer in hand and within the white area, they drew and filled in a solid red circle. Precarious was an understatement, with the upper part of the wall slanted inward and what had to have been a drop of a few hundred feet at least.

McCoy continued, “What was it like working with the late Madeline Douglas?”

“Uh, Madeline …?”

“She was with you in Garner’s Peak, I believe. You played a mountain climbing daredevil.”

“Ah, yes. Madeline. Well, I couldn’t say …”

Using the first sprayer again, the person began writing something inside the red circle, some sort of graffiti perhaps. I was sure the cops or somebody would be showing up any minute. A word, painted in white against a red background. What was it? I wondered.

“… there was just that one scene we did together actually. You know, where the … Oh … Oh, my god!”

I jumped out of the chair and rushed to the window. The person’s rope had either snapped or come loose, and they were falling, flailing, slamming against the out-jutted lower wall, then tumbling down to the roof of the bottom portion of the structure. The figure lay there motionless. On the way down, the sprayer kept spewing out white paint, leaving a wild streak down the wall which left a splatter around the spot where they’d landed.

“Bedford!” yelled Erica. “What’s wrong?”

“That guy fell!” I replied. “He was hanging off the dome and fell. I saw it happen. Oh, god!”

Erica came to the window. McCoy remained seated, trying to peer around us. Quintin stuck his head between me and Erica then suddenly dashed out of the room. The cameraman detached one of the cameras and had it aimed over our shoulders.

People ascended from the streets and were gathering on top of the parking garage near the dome, having seen for themselves what had happened. As we continued to watch, within a few minutes a fire truck pulled up alongside of the structure. They were getting the ladder ready. The person was still not moving.

"Can you zoom with that?" I asked the camera guy. I came around behind him to get a look at the view-screen. He turned the lens, enlarging the person's image. It turned out to be a young Black woman in t-shirt and jogging pants. She was face-down, but it was obviously female.

McCoy was now at the window with Erica. Quintin hadn't returned.

Erica's phone sounded. "Yeah, what's happening? Oh, you're on your way over there? Well, let us know how things are. They're lifting a ladder to the roof, trying to get to him."

"Her!" I yelled.

"Oh, it's a she. Let us know something, OK? And be careful crossing over. Fine … That was Quintin. He's going over to see if he can help. He said something about how everything would be OK, that he knew her, which seems weird since I can barely tell anything from up here. How do you suppose that is?"

"Don't know," I said. "Listen, I'm going over there, too. Sorry, Dick. We'll talk another time."

Erica turned from the window. "Bedford, wait!"

But I was already out, headed down to the elevator. Running through the lobby and outside, I could think of only one thing: the image of the woman lying there so reminded me of Ne'Tasha. I had to get there to see for myself, as insane as the notion was. While running down the side street, I felt the soreness returning to my joints, like it'd been the previous morning. Was it just age? I'd never felt more out of shape, having to stop occasionally to catch my breath.

After struggling up the stairs along the side of the parking garage, I got near the fire truck and could see Quintin nearby and looking up. The ladder was still already extended, the basket set against the edge of the roof. They got the stretcher laid across its railing. Once the basket had nearly reached the pavement, a cop came up and motioned me away to where the rest of the crowd stood. An ambulance came in between us and the fire truck. Quintin spotted me and came walking over.

“They’ve got her now,” he said. “We should go on back. Nothing else for us to do. I’ll call Miss Erica to let her know.”

“Is she …?”

“Too soon to say. They’ll probably take her to Big Charity first. Come on.”

We’d gotten back to the hotel lobby and were waiting on the elevator.

“What was your last name again?” I asked him.

“Chavers.”

“You don’t know a Ne’Tasha Chavers by chance, do you?”

“You mean, Tasha? How do you know my sister?”

“I met her once, while shopping for groceries in Mandeville. She’s a street artist, right?”

“Yeah.” He looked at me kind of funny, like I’d told a joke he didn’t get. Then one corner of his mouth lifted. “Did you date her or something?”

“No, no. I only met her that one time.”

We were on the elevator heading up.

“Man, I mean,” he continued, “it’s like there’s like this vibe I’m getting off you, like you two have something going on.”

“Sorry, I’m not sure how you’re getting this. I hardly know her.”

“Oh, you know her alright. Listen, I realize I’m talking weird and all, but … let’s not say anything about it to the others. Are you in town for awhile? Would you mind meeting me later?”

“I’d really like to know what this is about, too. You said you got a *vibe* off me?”

“Let’s just cool it for now.”

After we’d returned to the tenth-floor suite, Erica approached me first.

“How bad was it?” she asked.

“They’re taking her to the hospital,” I replied. “Too soon to tell.”

“What was she doing up there?”

“All I know was, she’d repelled from the roof of the dome and was spraying something on the wall.”

McCoy asked, “You think it was a protest of some kind?”

“Believe me,” Erica replied, “there are people who’ll do the weirdest stunts, without any regard for their own safety.”

She then led me aside, while Quintin talked with McCoy. “Listen, Dick said he’d be willing to reschedule the interview, after I’d pleaded with him, considering the circumstance. He’s got some

people to meet before heading to the airport for his flight. I really wanted Quintin to have his moment, too, but you know how it is. You really need to hear him play the piano."

"Yeah, I'll do that sometime," I said. I was looking at Erica's face, particularly her makeup. Back in my acting days, it had been normal procedure to check one's makeup in between takes. "You know, you've got a little …" I closed one eye and pointed to it.

"Really?" She pulled out a compact and checked. "Oh, yeah. Thanks, I would've never known. Wow, that's so unlike me." With a wad of tissue, she wiped free the smudge.

"Erica, are you …?"

"Fine. I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah. There, that must've done it. How does it look now?"

"Fine."

"You sure? You want a closer look?" She was tippy-toeing up to my face, blinking her eye.

"Cut it out!"

Erica laughed.

The camera guy was packing his gear. I shook hands and gave my best apologies to McCoy. He gave me the same line, "You know how it is. You've been in this business almost as long as I have." It was, if nothing else, the extended version of what all the people I'd worked with had used instead of the more curt, "Don't call me, I'll call you." And he didn't really mean it toward me as much as toward someone new like Quintin.

Erica was talking with her young client — rather, they were having the "talk", that he shouldn't let it discourage him, that there would be more opportunities, though the big ones like this were scarce. She then gave him a hug, her way of further assuring him she'd keep his file open.

"Why don't the three of us catch some lunch?" I suggested.

"Sorry, I've got some calls to make," Erica said, trying to head off McCoy. "Why don't you two hang out. Mentor him, Bedford. Make him let you hear him play. OK? You'll be blown away, I just know it."

Quintin was helping the camera guy carry some of his gear, while Erica talked with McCoy.

I went over to the window for one last look. The writing on the

dome's upper wall appeared to spell out as one word, in cursive script: "Joy". In white lettering, it was set against what was like the red corona of the "flower" she'd drawn. Even the streak of paint coursing down the wall to the bottom formed a kind of stem, its root planted where she'd landed and lain sprawled out.

Ne'Tasha's words came back: "the greatest joy lies in the potential." What could've been, but wasn't there yet. Or, looked at in a positive way: what could be, if I would wait long enough for it to appear.

An odd image came to thought: Ne'Tasha lying there, the seed from which the flower had sprung. She'd given her life to make it grow. And there was *joy* in the blooming. What a strange idea had just been planted in my mind. Was it from her? Was it a message? To me?

Erica came up from behind and whispered in my ear, "Remember, we've got to stay focused on the plan. There's still that photo shoot I want to do with you. We're going to make this happen, babe. OK? I'll be in touch then." She then kissed me on the cheek. Her perfume was sweet, like strawberries.

I caught a glimpse of her face before she turned and walked toward the door. Those eyes, that smile, that hand squeezing my arm. Could she have been just teasing me some more? Or could it be, she was trying to come on to me like before, after all those years?

The Hunt

Quintin led me to this nice little restaurant within walking distance from the hotel. The place was already filling up, so we ordered some to-go and sat at one of the wrought iron tables out front. He seemed reluctant to talk about himself — rather he was a modest kid, to be truthful — so I tried coaxing things out of him in between bites. Turned out he was a jazz pianist from right there in town and had been doing gigs at places all over, until Erica discovered him a couple of nights before while dining with another client. It was a gamble on her part, hoping to get McCoy to stay a little longer and finish off with a brief profile. It probably would've been the biggest break for Quintin, televised exposure with a top talk-show host, if not for that incident which had set things back.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “Miss Erica has some great ideas for promoting me. But I’m a musician, not a businessman. Playing jazz is all I know. I never thought about going anywhere with it outside the city, other than those few gigs I do on the north-shore. She seems to think I need national exposure, something I can’t wrap my head around at the moment.”

“She is a powerhouse,” I said. “You couldn’t do better.”

“I just wish I hadn’t let her down with that Dick McCoy fellow.”

“Believe me, it won’t burst her bubble in the least. You say you’re from around here?”

“Born and raised. Ninth Ward actually. It’s a suburb east of town. I grew up with Tasha. We’re not really brother-sister. My parents adopted her when I was about maybe ten. After I found out how special she was, she made me promise not to tell anybody.”

“Special?”

Quintin waited for a few people to pass on the sidewalk. “She’s missing something.”

“Missing … what?”

“What everybody else has, but she doesn’t. This is just what I’ve gathered on my own over the years. Perhaps it’s made me into something of a philosopher, I don’t know. Mister Bedford, why do you think people die all the time? I mean, we’re all going to die someday, right?”

“I guess we’re just made that way. Dying is just a part of living. We’re human beings, after all.”

“But think about it. What does it take for a person to die, besides disease or killing or natural causes? The answer I came up with … is *time*. We have time to die. Tasha doesn’t.”

I laughed. “Sorry, that’s just too far out for me, pal. I mean, come on. Everyone’s life is ruled by time, whether they like it or not.”

“But take away time, and what have you got? Don’t you see? Life begins when we’re born and ends when we die. A beginning and an end, marking off a brief portion of time. Without time, there’s no beginning and no end.”

“The same could be said of a lot of things,” I told him. “Something that never dies, can you even say that it ever lived? This table, that street. Those are not alive. Ne’Tasha seems very much alive, more so than most people I know. She took my hand. It was a living human hand.”

“You touched her then?” he asked, brow furrowing.

“Yeah, it was just a hand shake, though like this.” I curled the fingers of my hands over each other, like she’d done with mine.

“That must’ve been how she got inside you,” he said. “And you got inside her. I used to have that connection, but then I lost it somehow.”

“*Inside* me.” I looked at my hands and remembered how, that night she was hit by a car and “killed”, I had that headache and some sore joints. But then it subsided, and somehow she managed to revive. Then, while I was running down the street after she’d fallen off the dome, the same aches then returned. But now, I felt fine. If we were linked in some weird way, perhaps it was my life which was sustaining hers — a crazy enough notion. But could that also have meant the other way around?

“Ever since I met Ne’Tasha,” I said, “I’ve felt … different. Invigorated. Like I can take on the world, get my career back maybe. Though each time she seems a goner, I feel defeated, too, if only for a moment. And just from touching her hand.”

“That’s what music does to me,” Quintin replied. “You see, I think of music as if it were a river, like the Mississippi, constantly flowing, never ending. When I start a piece, I dip my hand into those deep flowing waters. After I take my hand out, the music just keeps going. I feel drained, but at the same time renewed. People talk about ‘making’ music. I don’t make anything. And yet, I wonder. What effect does my playing have on the music itself? What have I contributed to its course?”

“You know,” I took up the topic, “with acting, I might play a role, someone else, not myself. But when the camera stops rolling and I go back to my day-to-day life, I’m left to wonder, too. Where does that person go? Did they only exist for the time I gave them life? Some would say, ‘well, it’s just a fictitious character, created by the writer.’ If the character is made to die in a movie, they’d say he was dead, gone. But I could go back and play the same role, bringing it back to life. And if preserved on film, who can say if it doesn’t keep on living over and over, never really dying.”

Quintin smiled. “That sounds like Tasha, doesn’t it?”

“But she’s a human being, not a character in a movie.”

“And yet, human’s die. Tasha doesn’t.”

“Which makes her not human, which doesn’t make any sense.”

“But think about the characters you played,” he continued.

“What if you were to keep being that character, abandoning yourself to it? What if I dived into that river of music and let the current carry me away with it? Where would we end up? Maybe we can then understand Tasha a little better than we think.”

“Or else people are liable to say we’re both crazy.” Sitting there, laughing with Quintin and looking between the buildings lining the upper street, I spotted the top of the Superdome in the distance. “I wonder if she’s back already.”

“Only one way to find out,” Quintin replied.

I drove us to the parking garage over on Perdido, and we walked the two blocks to what everyone from miles around knew as Charity Hospital. A huge behemoth of a structure built in the 1930’s, its towering main entrance faced Tulane Avenue. In the renovated waiting area situated in the courtyard between the two wings, people were jammed in left and right. Old and young, Black and White and everything in between, they’d been coming there for decades seeking treatment for a host of maladies, infirmities and desperate hopes that someone there would be kind and patient enough to just listen to them.

While we waited at the reception desk for word of if and where they’d brought in Ne’Tasha, a television in one corner had a local newscast showing footage of the incident at the dome. I recognized the portion of video taken by McCoy’s cameraman from the hotel, including the zoom-in I’d requested. She seemed so lifeless and helpless, lying there face-down. There was no way anyone could’ve survived such a fall. Our waiting for answers and being told to try this department then go to that department was working on my nerves. I felt it would’ve been better if I’d gone out front of the hospital and yelled her name up at all those hundreds of windows dotting the concrete face of that urban giant.

Eventually we found a female staff member who'd been in the emergency unit when an ambulance delivered a Black woman with multiple severe injuries. They'd started treatment, but within minutes her vital signs deteriorated. They'd tried what they could, but nothing worked to save her. A call was made to the coroner's office for pickup. That was the last thing she'd heard.

Quintin called the coroner to see if they'd received a young Black female from Charity within the last few hours. The person he spoke with said there was no record of such a request from the hospital for pick-up.

"As crazy as this might sound," he said, "it appears she's already taken flight."

"But where to?"

We were in an empty and sparsely lighted corridor in one wing of the hospital. Headed toward where we hoped to find our way back to the front waiting area and main entrance, we passed a wall bearing the words, "Welcome to the Medical Center of Louisiana / Where the Unusual Occurs & Miracles Happen".

Quintin said he was staying with his aunt and uncle down on Magazine Street in the Garden District. I offered to save him the bus fare by driving him back. I owed the guy for at least trying to help me understand this weird connection I had with Ne'Tasha. I wasn't entirely on-board with his "has no time" theory, but it gave me something to contemplate once I could get back to the other side of the lake.

Their house was what was called shotgun-style, with hardly more than four or five feet separating it from the ones on either side. Still, it was well-kept and fronted by a short wrought iron fence. The front room served as both the living area and the spare sleep-space for Quintin. He told me on the way that Ne'Tasha stayed with them whenever she was visiting the city, using a room in the back.

We entered the kitchen where his aunt was cooking. Quintin was quite forthright after he'd introduced me. "Auntie, you seen Tasha lately?"

"I seen Tasha," she said. "She was here just a little while ago."

"How long ago?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe a few hours. She was kind of scratched up and bruised, wanted to take a shower and change, then she just up and left."

Quintin asked, “She didn’t say where?”

“I guess back over the lake where she lives now. After she left, that’s when I seen on the news about the girl that feel off the Superdome. She looked like Tasha, dressed the same, but I can’t imagine my niece doing something so crazy, you know what I’m talking about?”

She thanked me for bringing Quintin home, even offered me some food for my trouble. I told her it was no trouble. I took the food anyway, since she’d insisted. And I wasn’t one to argue with an insistent elderly lady.

I got off the causeway at Mandeville shortly after 5:00. It was still light, and I was headed down Florida. Normally I made the right turn onto Massenet which ended at my house at the tip of the peninsula. Instead, I drove on down to the meat market and pulled into that fast-food place across the roadway. I wanted to retrace the steps of the woman in scrubs I’d seen the previous day, and walked around to the back of the restaurant. The drive led onto a side street. Down one way was the entrance to a parking lot for some offices. The other way showed a gravel drive to what looked like an auto repair shop. If Quintin was right about some vibe coming from me, that vibe was now directing me toward the gravel drive, around the repair shop and into another parking lot for a set of apartments on the next street. At that point, I lost the vibe, leaving me with no idea where she might’ve gone from there. Perhaps one of the apartments? Or perhaps the signal was cut, so I wouldn’t be able to locate her destination. If it had been her doing, she probably didn’t want me seeing her in such shape at the moment. I knew I wouldn’t.

I headed back to my car and toward home, left wondering what had possessed her to climb the Superdome and leave that message.

Did she know I would see it? Couldn't she have chosen a less dangerous way of displaying it?

Only when I got back to the house did I check my cell phone. There were at least six calls from Erica I'd missed. Knowing her, she would've crossed the lake and been waiting for me when I drove up. However, she hadn't done that, which went to show how little I really knew about her anymore. Running around in search of Ne'Tasha had taken my mind off her schemes for relaunching my career — that is, whatever ideas Erica had been entertaining, including those of possibly getting me into bed with her. I called back, but got no answer. Either she was pissed or presently occupied with another client. Work for her was a stimulant. Without it, she probably wouldn't know what to do with herself.

Among the messages on my home phone was one not unlike that which had woke me up around 2:00 that morning — a brief instant of silence, then no more.

After trying some of the food Quintin's aunt had given me, I took a drink out onto the deck. I looked out over that vast body of water to where New Orleans lay somewhere over across the way, out of sight. The sun was behind the causeway, partially hidden among a large band of clouds. The steeple of the old church on the adjacent peninsula stood tall, stern and lifeless, as usual — a sentinel from ages past, its bell long silenced. The white clapboard walls were already fading to gray then black, the silhouette of its steeple left like a pin sticking up at the end of its promontory. Later, both would get merged with the darkness. Yet, I knew it would still be there, waiting for the sun to hit it from the east and light up the outer walls once more.

That night I dreamed that Ne'Tasha was out on the deck, keeping watch while I slept. I wanted to get up and join her, but my body said no. In the morning, I actually looked out there, half expecting to see her sleeping in one of the lounge chairs.

Erica called about 9:00 in the morning on Saturday, sounding terribly relieved that nothing had happened to me, made like she was scolding me a bit, then gave me the news — Dick McCoy wanted to interview the woman who had fallen off the Superdome.

The Cage

I had to check my phone to remember what day it was. Saturday morning. From the deck, I should've guessed from seeing a few people already out on the pier, sitting or standing with rod-and-reel in hand. I knew there would be more by noon, all with hefty coolers for whatever they hoped to catch. Some would even have boats in the water. As usual, hardly a gull in sight. The weather was perfectly gorgeous for the occasion, as well. I wished I could've said the same thing about what Erica had just told me. It had to be the height of lunacy, Ne'Tasha wanting to put herself out there just to get ridiculed and shamed.

I couldn't stand the thought of it. This time I wasn't going to let anything stop me. In the morning, I finished piecing together the parts of the book I was repairing, then left it on my workbench to give the glue time to set. Not even taking a lunch break, I drove to that fast-food place across from the meat market and parked. It had gotten hot, as I walked around the back of the restaurant. I wasn't sure why I chose the stealth approach, when I could've just driven over to the other street which fronted those apartments where I'd assumed she lived. Maybe I thought I could evade her radar somehow.

A man on a riding mower was cutting grass. I flagged him, and he stopped the engine.

"Pardon me," I said, "I was trying to find a friend who lives in one of those apartments. Could you help me out?"

"Well, I just work for the owners," he replied. "I don't know anything about anyone who lives here."

"Is there somebody I can speak with then?"

"You could try the office. It's over on the other street. You'll see. There's a lady with the VOA who pays me. She might can tell you something."

"Thanks."

"No problem." He cranked the mower and continued on.

I walked back over to the other street, spoke with the lady, and gave her Ne'Tasha's full name. The only Chavers she had listed was a Vance Chavers in number 23. She was even kind enough to tell me how to find it.

Returning to the apartments, I climbed the stairs on the backside of the front building. The man was still cutting grass out front, but back there it was pretty quiet. The landing overlooked a small courtyard between the other two buildings behind. The door to 23

was nondescript. Nothing to say that Ne'Tasha lived there. I'd half expected some sort of art work to mark the spot, but not even a decoration or fancy curtains in the one window.

I knocked, waited, knocked again, waiting some more. After looking all around, I tried the knob. It turned.

"Hello!" I called into the darkened interior. With the door open, the space was lit up a bit. There were a few simple pieces of furniture. The place was quite clean and neat actually. But the thing that immediately caught my eye was that framed movie poster on one wall: *Night Train*. It was the only film from my career casting me as a villain, a stalker of beautiful women on a train. That is, until the main character, played by Elizabeth Newman, turned the tables on mine. Soon afterwards, in real life, she became my wife. My name appeared of course in the smaller font, as it usually did. Never top billing, which had always been fine by me. The work and credit had been satisfaction enough back then. Still was. No envy or jealousy felt for the names up top, including Lizzy's.

I walked toward the back which included a bedroom and bath. I found those lime-green scrubs folded and left on the dresser. Still, no one. This was getting weird. No locked door. No artwork. But a poster for one of my earlier films. I reached for the closet door in the bedroom. Sure, like I had permission! But then again …

It was all about me. Costumes I'd worn for the various parts I'd played, boxes of publicity photos, some props I remembered handling. On the top shelf, there were bound volumes of scripts from the movies and that one TV show I'd starred in. I knew then I was dealing with a super-fan deluxe. She seemed to know everything about everything I'd ever done, even some of the earliest bit-parts I'd been lucky to have landed. My whole history was in that closet.

And in my mind, I was back riding the high seas of my career again — the years of struggle with putting myself out there but getting hardly a nibble; still, I kept plodding until I'd landed that first big role, that first catch; then, the years of plenty, where the roles were coming in back to back, hauling them in, including finding Lizzy and having Jenny, and feeling like the life of the party, the center of attention, the captain of my own yacht; finally, the divorce over her cocaine addiction and trying to get her into rehab, the offerings reduced to one liners and movie scenes cut and TV series canceled after one episode, phone calls not being

returned, the empty promises that fell through; I drifted for a while on the waters of a dead calm, until I'd had enough of losing bait to scavengers and headed to harbor.

It was tough, seeing the remnants of fame sucked out with the tide, returning me to the dregs of anonymity and struggling to pay bills again and wondering if there was anything left to do but sit and wait for death. I drank, I gambled and lost, slept around some and got beat up by one woman's husband and his buddies — that one landed me in a hospital where at least the nurses were real nice to me. I used some of the earnings from investments to buy the house on the peninsula, fixed up the place, then started my routine of hiding out, even from the invites to fan conventions — "What did I owe that bunch of idiots?" I snobbishly came to conclude.

I shut the closet door. After I did, I heard a woman's voice.

"Hello?"

When I walked out, she was in the doorway and nearly fell backwards over the railing for the landing.

"Bedford! What are you …"

"I could say the same thing, and I will. What the hell are you doing here?"

Erica held a hand to her chest, breathing hard. "You just scared the shit out of me, that's all." She entered the doorway. "I mean, I was in the area and saw you and decided to follow, but had no idea that, well, … I'd find you here. This is not your secret hideaway, is it?"

"What would I need another place to hide out for? Even if it was, it obviously didn't work. Be honest Erica. What are you doing here? What interest do you have in this place?"

"Like I said, …"

"No. Uh-uh. You're here because of Ne'Tasha Chavers. Admit it."

She stared at me, in the astonished way Ne'Tasha had that first time she'd seen me in the grocery. "Listen, I'm just gonna leave, OK? Bye." She backed up and turned toward the doorway.

"What do you know about her?" I then asked. "For once, be straight."

Erica stopped, one hand gripping the door-frame. She was whimpering. "I didn't mean it. I mean, I just couldn't avoid it, even if I'd …" She turned back and sat down in a chair near the door, hands over her face.

"What?" I said. "What did you do? Tell me."

“I thought she was … but now. I saw the footage on the news. I knew it was her. Had to be. But how? Then, when Dick McCoy called and asked me to get some confirmation about the woman from the dome, if she was for real, and try to get in touch … he said she’d contacted him. Knew his personal number. I knew then.”

I sat on the sofa. “What happened?”

She sniffed and took some tissue from her purse. When she could breathe again, Erica continued. “That night I left your place, I was driving toward the ramp for getting on the causeway. I didn’t even see her. It was like she just walked out and stood there, waiting. I slammed on the brakes. When the car struck, it pulled her under. I could feel it going over her, like a major bump in the road. Oh!” She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head.

After a minute of silence, I said, “What then? Did you stop and check on her?”

“No!” She looked at me wide-eyed. “I panicked. I saw no point in stopping, but kept going, speeding up. I nearly hit another car, I was in that much of a hurry to get away. I thought I could put it behind me, hide it deep inside. But then, there she was again. Bedford, she’ll tell them, tell everybody. Don’t you see? Even if she survived, it won’t do me any good. Oh, I don’t want to go to jail. I can’t.” Then, her expression changed, dumbstruck-like. “But, how did you …?”

“I didn’t. I knew her already. Quintin knows her, too. Grew up with her actually. You’ll have to face him, as well.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “He’ll hate me, too. I already know she does. I can’t let anybody find out. I’ll call Dick and get him to cancel the interview, say it’s not really her, or something. You’ve got to help me convince him.”

“Nothing I can do, trust me. It was her alright that fell from the dome. Quintin says it’s happened before. Somehow, she’s learned how to cheat death. Almost like she’s daring it to try and take her. I don’t know the whole story. But you’re right. We can’t let her go on McCoy’s show. No one would believe her. I can’t understand what he’s thinking, either. Doesn’t he know this could ruin him? It’d be scandalous, to say the least. Instead of a street artist, they’ll be calling her a con-artist. I can’t let that happen.”

In talking about Ne’Tasha’s daring and McCoy’s rashness, I was drawing from my own experience of that bold pursuit of gaining an audience’s attention. After seeing again all that stuff the street artist

had taken such great pains in collecting and preserving in her closet, I felt like the whole thing, finding her apartment and gaining easy entry, had been planned. It was as though I was meant to open that closet and gaze once more upon what had been my one shining moment in the spotlight. The whole thing started to sicken me, to think that I'd put myself out there like some idiot hollering, "Look at me! Look at me! See me! See me!"

Once, a disgruntled director had shared with me his stark insight into the movie business, that actors were nothing more than caged animals in a zoo for the public to gawk at, while the zoo-keepers, the producers and promoters, kept feeding them scraps while feeding themselves off the ticket receipts. I was too young and naive to see where he was coming from. But now, only after having escaped the zoo myself, I was coming to some realization of having once been caged there without ever noticing it.

I felt something squeezing my hand. It was Erica's. She had this look of pleading for me to cover for her. She was leaning toward me, seemingly ready to insert herself between me and the sofa's arm-rest.

Just then, another voice, heard from outside: male, young. "Tasha! You wanna come hear me play? Tasha!" Quintin came to a stop in the doorway when he saw us. "Wait a minute. What are y'all … ? Where's Tasha?"

"Not here," I replied. "Sorry, we let ourselves in."

Erica had retracted her hand while putting a look of shock on her face at seeing him appear. Now, her face was down. She'd have to say something sooner or later to the guy, I thought.

I got up and said, "Also, I know I shouldn't have, but I took a look inside her closet. Stuff, gobs of stuff about me, about my career. It must've taken her years to collect that much. Did you know she was that big a fan?"

"Tasha's always been a movie freak," Quintin said. "But yeah, she really dug you for some reason. That's why I was a bit dumbfounded when we met. I couldn't wait to tell her I'd met Bedford Lewis. Crazy as this may sound, I think that's why she got up on the dome and did that stunt. I had no idea she would go that far with it though. I'm sorry you had to see it." He was shaking his head at the incredulity of it, as was I.

Erica sighed, stood up and said, "Well, I really need to get going. It was Bedford's idea I tag along. But I have to get back. You're

playing tonight, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he said, "I usually play Snafu's on Saturdays. It's on the main strip here in town."

"Well, I'll try to drop in later on. Bedford, too. But don't forget. I want to do those photos of you on Monday. Then we can talk about setting up a touring schedule. Just dress nice, OK?"

"Erica," I said, stepping toward her.

She just wiggled her fingers at me as she was backing out the door, mouthing something like, "He's awesome!" giving me the thumbs up, making a phone-sign with her hand, then turning and disappearing. She'd done it again. Panicked.

I turned to Quintin. "So, have you been able to get in touch with her?"

"Not yet," he said. "I saw the door open, and thought she was home already."

"You ought to know. She called Dick McCoy. He wants to interview her."

"What!"

"By the way. Who's Vance Chavers. An alias?"

"That's my uncle Vance. He pays for her to stay here. Dick McCoy. You're kidding me."

"No. Erica told me just this morning."

"Wow! Anyway, Ne'Tasha doesn't make much money herself. She refuses to get a regular job. Her art jobs are few and far between, and hardly cover her light bill. She's what you could call a free spirit. Actually, more like a wild child, taking a chance with going public like that. Man!"

"My thinking exactly. Is, uh, there a boyfriend? Or girlfriend, rather? Sorry, had to ask."

"She just stays to herself. The guys who tried dating her can't keep up with her. She's always on the move. I'm worried one of them's gonna get sore and do something. That's why I told her she needs to keep a gun."

"What did she say?"

"Huh?"

"When you told her she needed a gun."

"Oh, she just laughed and said, 'What's the point of having a gun? It won't do them no good.' I told her, 'It's not for them. It's for you.' She then said, 'What I need is a vacation.' So, I said, 'A vacation? You don't do nothing.' She kind of looked off in space and

said, ‘Hm! I’m thinking the Bahamas.’ She’s something, isn’t she?”

“A vacation, huh?” I iterated, then chuckled. “What she could really use are a few good life insurance policies. Then, she can buy the Bahamas.”

The Escape

I’d made up my mind, then. I wasn’t going to let Erica Desmond lure me back into that cage — nor into her bed, for that matter. But neither could I keep letting Ne’Tasha Chavers hold the door open, waiting for me to come out. She was waiting alright, but where?

I’d known actors who, to keep their private lives hidden, could evade the most persistent of reporters with the cleverest of lines and maneuvers. But Ne’Tasha’s evasiveness of my queries was something entirely remarkable. She was inside me, as well as into me big time. Yet, every time I thought I had her, she would slip from my hands like a bar of soap in the shower. Who was she? Where did she come from? Where did she go when not where I thought she’d be? I couldn’t truthfully say she was teasing and laughing at my efforts, not even being sure if she knew I was in pursuit. Left in such a quandary, I decided to go with what that fan-girl met in a grocery store had already hinted at — stop chasing her and wait for her to find me.

Now, I could’ve just pumped Quintin for clues, but the guy was occupied enough with his own doubts and reservations concerning Erica’s prodding him this way and that. He’d found his outlet through his music, and I was ready to observe its power to deliver, soon after we’d left Ne’Tasha’s apartment.

The bar was called Snafu’s, just a few blocks back up Florida. I wanted to sit in and listen to what Erica had been raving so much about. Now, I wasn’t looking to get into jazz music, but it seemed a great opportunity to see how someone else put their talent ahead of their career.

We’d gotten there before the main crowd had arrived. Quintin, in safari shirt and jeans, was joined on stage by a male bass player in a black shirt and black fedora and a female drummer with short spiky hair and wearing a loose tank-top bearing a picture of Louis Armstrong blowing his trumpet. I found a spot up front, while they ran through a few numbers. Quintin had described music as a

constantly flowing river, his hands dipping in and out whenever he took to his instrument. Thus, as soon as he touched the keyboard, those hands of his were in steady motion, in the swell of things, and I sat mesmerized by their smooth and light gestures running up and down the ivories. After a while, more people started wandering in, while the trio wrapped up their rehearsal. Then, the three took a break until it was time to go on for real.

"What do you think so far?" he asked me.

"Man, I had no idea a piano could sound so good. Erica was so insistent I hear you, and I see why. Not disappointed at all. Thrilled would be the word."

"Thank you, thank you. And my auntie thanks you, too. Just wish Tasha had come along. She's usually around. Don't know why I haven't seen her yet."

"I was kind of hoping to see her, too. She's a really sweet kid."

"You don't think anything else has gone down, do you?"

"I'd probably feel it for sure, if it did. Can't you call her and see if she's OK?"

"That's another weird thing about her. She doesn't keep a phone on her. I can only catch her when she's home. Like I said, she keeps to herself. Doesn't seem the least bit lonely about it either. Sometimes, she'll get so wrapped up in a movie, I can't even hold a good conversation with her."

"Like she's in another world, huh?"

"Yeah, you said it."

That other world I knew quite well. Working on set, I would get into a groove of playing the part and working off the other actors or the director's cues. I had to make it believable, so I made myself believe it, as well. Lived it, actually, even if for the few minutes of a take. After work, I'd get off and do something ordinary, like hang out at a bar or play tennis or take a drive, just to get my mind attuned to the real world again. I hardly ever watched my own stuff, except at premieres where I was expected to participate and enjoy it with everyone else. It would've been hard for me to relate to someone like Ne'Tasha who could immerse themselves in the fantasy. I was always glad to be as far removed from it as possible.

Now, in the world of acting, everything was managed. The dress, the posture, the hair, the delivery. And there's an audience made to face forward and gaze upon that organized spectacle. Being as I was into classical music, I'd attended a few concerts where one

sat and faced and paid attention to what was being done by the performers. As that bar continued to fill up with people, most engaged themselves mainly with eating, drinking, talking, walking around, coming and going, few if any ever facing forward and readying themselves for what was about to occur in that cramped corner where Quintin and his cohorts were readying themselves. Some scattered applause was had, as each of the three entered and took his and her stance with an instrument. Then, people went back to whatever they had been occupied with, while the river of music flowed and the trio dipped their collective hands into it and scooped up and dispensed the sweetness of its waters. To the crowd, it was nothing more than a decorative fountain, simply there for show.

With no obvious cues from Quintin or anyone else on stage, the three launched into the opening number as one, in perfect sync, letting the river of music take its course. But to where was it headed? I wondered. Where did it lead? If what Quintin had said was true, if the opportunity were offered one to dive into that river of time and music and be swept away, to what end should one expect to arrive? The crowd in that bar included few who seemed daring enough to find out.

I then sensed someone plop a purse on the table where I was seated. She then plopped herself in the chair on the opposite side. It was Erica, smiling, sleepy-eyed, limp as a noodle. The huntress had arrived to pluck her prize from the river and hurl him back into his cage. I'd seen her drunk before, so nothing to wonder about this time. Just wasn't sure where things would go from here, if she were allowed to have her way.

"Didn't I tell you?" she spoke over the noise of the place. "That guy can play. I mean, come on, why don't people listen to me? I know what I'm talking about. Don't you agree?"

"You were right," I said. "As usual. He's an amazing talent." I tried smiling back. If I'd sighed and frowned at her appearance, which would've expressed what I truly felt, it might've thrown her off balance and caused a scene.

"He sure as hell is. A real trooper. He deserves the spotlight, and I'm going to see to it he gets it. Understand?"

I nodded and grinned. Her eyes returned to the trio performing. That's where I wanted them to stay glued. The more she remained focused on where Quintin was headed — and believe me, even as

drunk as she was, she never missed a beat of any work-in-progress — the easier it was for my path to stray beyond the periphery. So, I would let her sway and snap her fingers and clap and laugh, and just pretend to laugh and clap along with her. She took regular gulps from her drink, while I occasionally put mine to my lips but then set it back down.

The trio finished their half-hour set, and another performer, a female singer with a guitar backed up by a guy on bongo drums, went on. Erica got up and flung her arms around Quintin's neck. She kept one there the whole time they talked and laughed, letting her hip bump his occasionally. Quintin glanced my way and raised his eyebrows, a signal that he knew where she'd been as much as I did. He also knew where she needed to go, which made me want to hug him myself.

"I'm taking Miss Erica back to Tasha's place," he told me, "to let her take it easy, you know."

"Good idea," I replied. "I'm not feeling too hot myself. Thanks for looking after her. I owe you one, man."

"No problem."

"Bedford," Erica said, placing a hand on my chest. "You're not coming to join the party? Why don't you hang out like you used to? Come on!"

"Not feeling too great right now."

"Why? What's wrong?" Now, the serious expression, but with a slight tilt of the lips. "Well, go get you some rest then. I still want to do that photo shoot, OK? You'll be there, won't you?"

"Sure. You get some rest, too. OK?"

"I'll do my best. Right, Quintin baby?" She tried winking at me.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, then sighed and shook his head.

I gave him a pat on the shoulder and a nod of encouragement, then to his ear only, "Not trying to tell you what to do, but if she tries anything …"

"I can handle it," he replied. "Don't worry. Hopefully Tasha will be there to help out."

My hope, as well. Knowing my publicist and her ways — knowing them quite well, actually — she would find some excuse for keeping the lights on and the action going. But considering what Erica had done to her, Ne'Tasha would be sure to shut that one down and right quick. Had to be, without a doubt.

I knew I would be. Indeed, after getting to the house and

struggling to make it up those stairs, I probably looked like someone who had been run over, too. Stripping and falling into bed was about all I could manage. I'd never felt so exhausted.

It was late into the night when I woke up with a sharp pain in my chest.

"This can't be happening!" I thought in a panic. "Please, not now!" I had to confess, it scared me shitless. I sat on the bed's edge for several minutes, rubbing my sternum and rib-cage. But the pain lay deeper, unreachable. I wasn't ready to buy into this, not yet. I'd do what I could to fight back. I made it to the kitchen and downed some water. Holding onto the counter, I somehow got the sharpness subdued to a dull throb. Thoughts of being found flat on the floor were quelled for the moment. I had gotten away from the precipice and been spared the fall. But there was none of the bravery I'd seen in Ne'Tasha. The woman had secured my greatest respect on top of my admiration.

"Bedford!" The sound of a woman's voice calling to me from outside was followed by repeated poundings on the front door. "Bedford!"

Grabbing a robe from the bedroom and throwing it over me, I went for the door.

She staggered a bit on the landing, bare-footed, clothes drenched, hair flat and dripping, arms dangling. It hadn't rained, I was sure of that at least.

At the end of one arm, Erica's hand held tight to the handle of a .38 revolver.

The Trial

Erica rushed and wrapped my neck in her arms. I could feel the pistol tapping against one shoulder blade with every other word she spoke.

"I did it again," she sobbed. "I can't hide it this time. Not this time."

"What did you do?"

"She made me do it. Or she did it herself. The woman's crazy, I tell you."

"Wait, are you talking about Ne'Tasha?"

She pulled her arms loose, sat on the sofa and tossed the gun onto the coffee table. "I just want you to know, I didn't mean to do any of it. Honest. I just couldn't help myself. You know how I am."

I stood and crossed my arms. "Remind me."

She wiped some hair from her face and took a deep breath. "I slept with Quintin. I mean, it wasn't his fault. I fell on the bed, pulling him down with me. He got loose and stood up. I got hold of his belt, undid his pants and …"

"You don't have to say anymore." I couldn't blame Quintin. The guy was smart, but young. I'd stumbled some in my early years, as well. I had no doubts he would make it, too, as long as he stayed true to his music. I went into the kitchen area, thinking I'd pour her a drink to settle her down. But then, thought better of it and looked in the cabinet for the coffee.

"Once I get them in my hands," she rambled on, "there's no escape. Well, except for you, maybe." Erica chuckled. "You were too hooked on your wife Lizzy who was hooked on crack and all that. I just let you go. Not like I wanted to. I can't count how many I've used then thrown away. But Quintin's different. I'm not going to treat him that way. I'm not letting him go. He's got a real future. That's why I'm not telling him any of this. You understand?"

"All I understand so far is you're here in the middle of the night, carrying a gun." I couldn't find the coffee, remembering I'd forgotten to pick some up, then went into the bathroom to get a towel instead.

"She used it first. I left him there soundly sleeping. Got a message from Dick McCoy, wanting me to put Ne'Tasha on a plane for Chicago. How was I suppose to do that? But she had to make it easy, didn't she? When I got in my car, she was in the back seat. Putting that gun to my head, she said, 'So, how was it? Oh, but you must've not liked it, you left so early.' I asked, 'What are you going

to do?' I was trying to stay calm, you see. Are you listening?"

"Uh-huh." I was looking for a clean towel, but settled for a damp used one, figuring she wouldn't mind.

"So, she says, 'I'm not doing that interview, if you're worried about that. Instead, what I want you to do is drive.' She made me go down one street then another. She said we were going to the police station where I would turn myself in. What a joke! Not knowing this town, I had no idea she was really leading me back here. When we got out, she made me walk down to the end of the pier. I knew then, she meant to kill me and get her revenge. With all that dark water at my feet, I was terrified, I tell you. It was deep, I was sure of it. No one would find me."

I came back with a towel, handed it to her, then sat and leaned back on the sofa. I was starting to get a headache.

Erica kept going. "Then, she said, 'Turn around.' She had the gun dangling from one finger, holding it toward me. 'Here,' she said, 'take it!' I shook my head. She shoved it at me. I took it. 'Go ahead!' she shouted, standing closer. I told her, 'No, I can't.' 'Do it!' she insisted, and grabbed both my hands, putting the barrel to her chest. I fought, trying to get my hands free without falling in the water. I don't know if it was her or me, but the gun must've gone off. Had to have. The look in her eyes told me so. She staggered back, stumbled and fell over the railing into the water. I couldn't let it happen again. I dove in and went under. I'm a pretty good swimmer, you know. I tried grabbing a hold of her hand, but she kept batting me away, fighting me, and sinking further. I couldn't hold my breath any longer and went up. After clinging to one of the posts, I climbed onto the pier and lay there, crying. That's when I picked up the gun and came here."

Erica wasn't doing anything with the towel except slinging it around. So, I took it from her and tried drying her hair.

"She's a demon, Bedford," she mumbled from under the towel. "You've seen it, or maybe you haven't. I mean, you know what she's done before, or tried to do. She's unstoppable."

I left the towel on her head and sat back again. "I just know one thing. Ne'Tasha is indestructible. No need to lose sleep over it."

"No!" She pulled the towel off and turned to me, wide-eyed, frizzy-haired. "She'll be back. I know it. She'll never be satisfied until she's driven me insane. There's only one way to end it all. She's got to kill me and get it over with." Erica grabbed my face

and pressed her lips against mine. “She’s in love with you, I know it. I’ll make her so jealous, she’ll hate me enough to blow my brains out. She’s got to!”

She kept kissing me over and over. I tried pulling away from her, but I was still a bit weak from that earlier bout. She pinned me against the end of the sofa, climbed on top and was straddling my hips, already starting to unbutton her blouse. It was still wet and clinging to her skin. She hadn’t even bothered to put her bra back on, it was that obvious.

But I’d been through this before, her little routine of corralling her prey. She had been drunk then, too, and known that Lizzy and Jenny weren’t home. It was not like she hadn’t been attractive. Still was, and very much so. Any guy would’ve been thrilled to get lost in those arms. That last time, however persistent she’d been, I just loved my wife and daughter too much to give in. But this time, what deliverance was there, except for the strength of my soul’s entanglement with Ne’Tasha’s?

“Erica!” I gripped both her wrists. “Not this time. Not this time.” There was still some strength in my fingers, at least. I really didn’t care that her breasts were already exposed. A woman’s nakedness held no charm for me anymore, just a momentary thrill set against the joy that Ne’Tasha had spoken of. I so longed for that joy, and to be rid of Erica’s misery.

She was struggling against my hold. The grimace on her face changed to a pout. After a moment, she relaxed, pulled loose and dropped her arms. “Why does everybody keep making me do what I don’t want to have to do?”

I tried buttoning her blouse, which was not easy considering the position I was in.

Her eyes narrowed and began watering. “I want you, Bedford. I want you so much.” She stroked my cheek.

I gave up on her blouse and turned my head. “To add me to your collection of trophies, is that it?”

“Don’t you see? My life has been nothing but one big dark empty hole, just like that lake out there. None of the ones I’ve ever had came close to fulfilling me. But I’m sure you could, if you’d just forget about her.” She bent over and pressed her head against mine. “Oh, Bedford! Let her go!” Her disheveled hair was draped over my face like a ragged curtain of seaweed.

“I’ve had to let too many go as it is,” I said.

She brought her lips close to my ear and whispered, “You’re so far removed from everybody. Why is that?”

I closed my eyes. “It’s easier to forget that way. And be forgotten.”

She sighed. “Detached is more like it.” Erica sat up, withdrawing both the ragged curtain and the heat of her breath from my cheek. “And yet you keep holding onto her. You’re in your own little world, Bedford. And she’s the ghost that haunts your dreams, keeping you from the real world, from real people.”

I looked up at her and said, “You know, it’s funny. You’ve had so many, yet none of them has ever done you any good. For the last few years, I’ve had none, and though I never had her, she’s the only one who has filled me with more joy than I ever knew.”

In a huff, Erica dismounted and finished buttoning herself. Facing the door, she said, “And what of it? You expect me to keep living like this, friendless, and being hounded for the rest of my days … by a dead woman?”

I sat up. “I’ll be dead soon, too. But believe me, I have no intentions of hounding you afterwards. Nor does she.”

Erica spun around. “What do you mean?”

“We all have to die sometime, don’t we? But she’s shown me what I have to look forward to. There’s nothing to regret anymore. No need to try making me famous again. If I’m letting go of anything, it’s you.”

Erica gasped and pressed her lips tight. She stared down at the coffee table. I saw what she was looking at. She reached and picked up the revolver. Her eyes squinted again, but with less tears and more determination. “Well, then. If I can’t have you, then … neither can she. I’m doing you a favor, Bedford. You can thank me from the grave, for putting your name back on top.” She lifted the gun and pointed it straight at me. Her hands was shaking, lips compressed, eyes shut. Then …

click … click, click, …

Erica stared at the pistol, popped opened its chamber, and screamed, “The little bitch! It wasn’t even loaded. How did she …?”

I got up, went to the bedroom and got dressed. After taking up the repaired book from my workbench, I cradled it with one arm and was heading for the front door. Erica was still sitting there on the sofa, head in hands. The empty revolver with which she’d meant to make me famous was back on the table. I opened then

closed the door behind me, never again to see her face — which was fine by me.

The Song

The old gentleman, Mister Davis, for whom I'd repaired the book, was already awake and having coffee. His house was over on Lakeshore Drive, one of those older homes with a large hip roof, green shuttered windows and a front porch supported by arched brick columns which raised it eight feet off the ground. The view of the lake across the roadway was wonderful. Back when I was house hunting, this was the first area I looked at before settling for the place over on the peninsula.

He invited me to sit with him in the kitchen and even offered to pour another cup. Having just had a gun pointed at my chest, I was in no rush to head back and face off with my nemesis anymore. So, I took his gesture gladly. I thought, why not slow down a bit Bedford and relax for a change. Leaving the book on the table, I took the cup he'd set before me and stirred in some milk and sugar.

Davis' face lit up at the thing I'd returned. "Ah, you finished it! Oh, yes. Yes, indeed." He donned a pair of wire-rim glasses and turned the book over and over in his hands. "You did a beautiful job. Much obliged. This here book has been such a treasure to me. Got it at a used book sale. It held up for a long time, but then started coming apart just this past year. Really broke my heart, not being able to read it without having everything coming loose. Yes, indeed." He had the cover open and was browsing several of the pages as if taking it for a test run. "Did you happen to read some while you were working on it?"

"Sorry, I've never been that much into books," I said. "Is it any good?"

"Any good?" he replied. "Why, this is some of the finest literature you could ever hope to lay your hands on. One of the oldest, too."

"I only glanced at the title. It's about a wolf, isn't it?"

"No, no, no, no! It's not a wolf. It's Beowulf. See?" He turned the book so I had a clear shot of the title page. "Beowulf was a gallant warrior from ancient times. Strong, too. Oh, so very strong, and brave. He could grapple with a monster with his bare hands, you

know. Listen here."

He licked a finger and started peeling back the pages. He did this for quite a while, until having gotten to about the midway point of the book he slid a finger down the sheet and said, "Right here. Now listen. You see, Beowulf had already killed this evil monster named Grendel. Now, he was going after Grendel's mother who had taken revenge and slaughtered one of his best companions. She was a mighty tough critter, too. And he went armed at first. But then, hear what happened." He took a breath and coughed before continuing. "Now, by hear, I mean listen. This is not something you read. The secret of it is in the sound and rhythm of the words. It's not just poetry either. It's a song. Here, listen. 'Then the Fighting-Geats' prince'—that was Beowulf, the fightingest man that ever lived …"

Then the Fighting-Geats' prince by the shoulder laid hold
Of Grendel his dam—ne'er regretted the fight,
And he, strong in war and all swelling with rage,
So flung his life's foe, that she fell on the ground.
But she soon paid him back his wages by hand
With terrible grips—clasping him to herself.
She then overthrew the strongest of warriors,
The weary foot-fighter, that prostrate he fell.

Then the hall-guest sat on him and drew out her knife,
Broad and gleaming of edge, and her bairn would
avenge—
All the offspring she had. On his shoulder there lay
His woven breast-armour, which shielded his life,
And the entrance withstood of point and of edge.

"Did you hear it? Hear it? Well, you got the picture, I hope. Anyway, she was a mean old hag, alright. Shrewd, too. But I got ahead of myself. I have to back up some. Yes, here it is. this is what I was aiming for. 'Again Hygelac's kin' — that's our same boy …"

Again Hygelac's kin had only one thought;

He did not lose heart but minded his fame.
He, fighter enraged, threw aside the chased blade,
With jewels bound round, strong and steely of edge,
That it lay on the earth, and put trust in his strength,
The hand-grip of his might. Thus should a man do,
Who thinketh at war to gain for himself
Long-lasting renown—careth not for his life.

"Fought her with his bare hands, he did." The old guy slapped the book shut. "You see, old Beowulf was no louse. He had no intention of letting that old broad pin him down, not like some saps these days who let women get the better of them. They just lay there, while she sits on top screwing their brains out, turning them this way and that way till they're like mush and have forgotten what it means to be a real man anymore. You married, by the way?"

"Divorced," I said. "But I get where you're coming from."

"You know, my Martha, bless her, was a fine woman. Beautiful as can be, inside and out. But she never would've dared take the dominant role, let me tell you. She wasn't raised that way. Why, when we made love, she would become so soft and gentle under me, opening up like, you know, …" He held his hands out and spread them apart.

I made as if I were clearing my throat.

"Oh, sorry, son. Didn't mean to get so graphic there. I mean, we're both grown men, aren't we? Right? But you've been there, haven't you?"

"Well, I'm ashamed to say it, but I've let myself at times get turned this way and that, too. But I like your point, how it's not what's on the outside that matters, but what's inside a woman. It seems I've waited too long to realize that truth, where the true beauty lies."

"You've found someone, then?"

I chuckled. "Have I! It's been like … skating on thin ice — with her, that is — wondering if I'll never see her again. She's more than a woman. She's … I really don't know what I'm dealing with, where it's going to lead me in the end. And the end is not too far off, either, I'm afraid."

"What? You're dying?"

“I haven’t been taking good care of myself. It’s bound to catch up sooner or later. And when it does, I wonder, who’ll be there? It’s scary sometimes.”

Mr. Davis reached over and patted my arm. Then, he left the room for a moment, coming back and holding out a $100 bill to me. “Here, take it. Go buy her some dinner. Tell her you love her. Don’t wait till …”

I took the bill from his hands and looked at it. It was more than I deserved. Still, I folded and stuck the bill in my pocket, not caring if it were a hundred or a twenty or nothing at all. Money at that point was the least of my worries.

“You know,” he said, staring out the window, “it’s like what that John Donne feller once said: ‘No man’s an island.’ And that last line, ‘Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.’ None of us is meant to live alone, I grant you. But isn’t it sad though, how we’re all bound to die alone eventually? Don’t you think?”

“How did he go?” I was gesturing toward the book which Davis had left on the table.

“Him? Why, it was as an old man fighting his last battle, against a dragon of all things. Some say the dragon symbolizes time, and that we all do battle with it everyday. I’m not much for symbols. A dragon is a dragon, no matter how it tries to cook you. But if you’ve got a moment, listen to something else.” He reopened the book, skimmed to the end and read,

> *… A wonder it is*
> *When a valiant earl may be destined to reach*
> *To the end of his life—when the man may no more*
> *The mead-hall frequent with his own kith and kin.*
> *Such was Beowulf’s case when the ward of the mound*
> *He sought, and shrewd conflict; himself he knew not*
> *In what sort his departure from earth would take place.*

The old man folded the book shut and nodded. “Dared till the end, but never knew. When you hear that bell, son … well, then you’ll know.”

I stood up, shook his hand and headed for my car. Breathing was becoming hard again. I hoped at least to make it back to the

peninsula. That is, before I …

The Departure

Five years before, when I first drove out to the tip of that strip of land which sliced into the lake waters like a dagger, I thought I'd finally reached the end of the world — my world. I could've still turned around and headed back, of course, back to California and browsing the trade-papers for open calls, if I'd wanted. But not forward though, not without a boat. That one strapped to the outside wall might've made it, if I'd attached an outboard motor. And what would've been the point of doing that, if all I got out of it was a deeper suntan? This was as far as I cared to go anyway. Even the pier offered little help, jutting out only so far, hardly enough to bridge a river even.

After making it back, I saw that Erica's car was gone — knew I could count on her to stay true to form. That's when I found Ne'Tasha at the foot of the stairs, invited her up, but for sometime afterward lost sight of the lovely street artist. Honestly, I felt whipped like never before.

When my eyes opened again, I was propped up against some pillows on the bed. The light beaming through the window told me that it was well into daytime already. It left a bright spot on one wall. However, framed within that spot were shadows of tree branches swaying. How could that be? I wondered. I remembered no trees being that close to the house, much less tall enough to reach the window. I could also hear the sound of a bell. In fact, it seemed to have been ringing that whole time. Could it have been the one in the steeple of that old church? It was a distant sound, not as near as I knew the old church to be on that other peninsula, empty and lifeless as it had always seemed. Who was over there ringing it now, after so many years? Why were they ringing it? But after a brief spell, the sound began to fade, while my attention turned to the figure seated beside me.

For it was Ne'Tasha sitting there on the edge of the bed, stroking my hair. Somehow my clothes had been changed to white pants and a tropical shirt. She was now wearing a pleated sundress trimmed with red and gold, and an azalea blossom was stuck in her hair. She then brought a bottle of water to my mouth, making me take a few

sips.

"I must've dozed off," I said. "Thanks for helping me to bed. Man, I've never felt so tired. How long was I …?"

She put a finger to my lips. "That's not important now. Time is just an illusion after all, such a meaningless thing that comes and goes before you know it. Think of it … like that spot of light on the wall. In your house by the lake, if it had been there, after a while it would've moved on. Then, what had really been there to begin with? The wall itself wouldn't even remember."

"Who are you anyway? I mean, what are you? No offense."

She sighed. "You have a right to know, I guess. I can't hold it back. I could never get enough of seeing you as an actor on the screen. You gave me such moments of joy with those stories. And now, here you are. I'm so blessed to have this moment with you, before we … well, there I go again, talking about that nothing called time."

"You're not human, are you."

"I'm what some would call a psychopomp, a guide to the soul. You had a heart that was failing, and you had refused the treatments they'd offered you."

"Was I wrong to?"

"Who knows if it could've given you more time, extending the life of the illusion? But finally for you, the illusion is no more. When I first went to stay with Quintin's family, it was because of his father's inoperable lung cancer. His took longer to run its course. No telling how many times I had to drown, before the moment came for me to guide him beyond. Now, here I am, your guide. You're my last run, and I feel so honored to be the one beside you."

"A guide to the soul. And what's the fare for this little journey? Two pennies on the eyelids?"

She shook her head, reached into a pocket of the dress and produced a slip of paper: that receipt I'd given her with my signature.

"Great!" I said, tossing the receipt. "So, where are you taking me? Where are we going?"

"We're not going anywhere," she replied. "We're already there."

She helped me up and led me to the front door. Out on the landing, I looked to the left. Where the peninsula should've been — that strip of land coming off the north-shore of Lake Pontchartrain

— there was open water. The flight of stairs was replaced with a couple of stone steps. Where I'd expected to see the pier jutting out over water to my right, there was a wide cobblestone walkway which cut across a grassy lawn and entered a grove of palm trees.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"I'm thinking the Bahamas," Ne'Tasha said, a finger to her chin.

"You think?"

"It's where I always wanted to go."

Ne'Tasha then took my hand and led me to a marble bench on the lawn, facing the water. The breeze was warm but pleasant. Cumulus clouds were gathered and traversing the far horizon. And not a single gull in sight.

"Like I always say," she said, seating herself beside me, "The greatest joy lies in the potential. What do you think about the Bahamas as a potential spot to vacation?"

"Well, I've only been to them one time. The beaches are really nice and bright, with water as clear and blue as the sky."

"Well, let's hang out there, then. You can teach me to fish. We'll have a great … Oops, sorry. What I mean to say is, it'll never end for us. That is, if you're up to it. I'm a handful, I'll have you know."

"I feel like I've only just begun to know you."

"But you've always known me, Bedford. I was the one sitting in the fifth row, middle seat. Remember?"

But what was there left of anything I could've remembered from before? Everything, everyone, even the remains of this tale once told, had been washed from my mind downstream. And everything, everyone that I was yet to encounter in that new place, I never stopped encountering, especially Ne'Tasha, as if we continued to open ourselves up to each other through the entirety of that ceaseless day …

… out there, on that other peninsula.

About the Author

FRED BICKHAM is the author of three novels, *Occasional Alice's, Jenneway's Pond*, and *Taking Sweedee Home.* Fred was born and raised in Louisiana, where he continues to live with his dog and two cats.